

Under a Strange Mask

BY FRANK BARRETT



UNDER A STRANGE MASK.



"LESTRAUNGE COULDN'T WASH HIS FACE WITH A WASH-LEATHER STUMP." (p. 170).

UNDER A STRANGE MASK.

BY

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UNDER A STRANGE MASK.

CHAPTER I.

LOEVALLY COURT



As I approached the house by the carriage-drive from the park, I caught sight of Miss Sylvester coming through the shrubbery by the private path from the church, which lies, I may tell you, not half a stone's

throw from Loevally Court.

She was a little person, this Miss Sylvester, though she gave you the impression

of being quite up to the average height of women because she was slight, carried her small head loftily, had a thin, long face with delicate features, and hands to match.

She had not perceived me; so I stopped short to have a good look at her, as an artist would pause before his favourite picture, or a gardener beside his cherished flower, and with the critical eye of one whose judgment is in dispute. It is part of a lawyer's business to form a just estimate of character; and I had lately parted from a young gentleman who had listened to my warm praises of Miss Sylvester with the subdued, sceptical smile of one who is too well-bred to dispute the claims of a lady to the esteem of her attorney.

“Can crafty design or sordid consideration have a place in that young soul?” I asked myself, pushing my spectacles a little closer to my eyes. But my sight was not long enough to detect any justification of such suspicion in her face. All I noticed was that she walked



THE LADY'S PARTING WORD. A COPY OF "PROMISES" SHE HAD GIVEN TO ME.
(p. 7)

with lassitude, and that her figure was a little bent with fatigue.

“She’s been fagging herself to death to give somebody pleasure, I warrant,” said I, abandoning the very thought of ill. “She’s pale and worn, I can see that. I wish to goodness she would grow a little stouter.”

At that moment she spied me, and her cheek flushing, her lips parting with a cry of pleasure, she came quickly to me; our friendship was not of a one-sided sort. I noticed that she wore a plain cotton dress of dark blue with white spots, gathered in at the waist with a ribbon. Her hair had tumbled down and had been put up loosely in a knot—and very pretty the soft brown mass looked against her white brow, with a stray curl or two taking the reddish tint of autumn leaves. She carried a basket in one hand and a cheap straw hat in the other; dropping both at her feet, she slipped off her loose garden gloves, and impulsively put her two soft,

slender hands in mine, murmuring a welcome. She looked into my face as if she would like me to kiss her, and so I took that pleasant privilege of an old man.

“It does one good to see an old friend,” said she.

“Why, certainly you look better now than when I first caught sight of you.”

“Oh, I was tired—to-morrow is our harvest Sunday, and I have been at work in the church all day—I’m not a bit now,” said she, picking up the things she had let fall as I stooped for that purpose. “And when I am tired all my courage goes, and I’m nothing but a stupid little coward:” saying this, with a frown at her own weakness, she crushed her hat up and crammed it, with her gloves, in the basket; then slipping her hand under my arm, she added, with a confiding smile, “Do you know, just before I saw you I was trying to invent some matter of business to bring you over here next week.”

“Ha, ha! you thought that if you did not make business an excuse for my coming, I might make it my excuse for staying away”

“Oh, I knew you would come if I only told you what was the matter with me; but I was ashamed to admit it.”

“Have you the courage to acknowledge it now?” I asked.

“Yes; it’s simply this. I have not had a chat with any one for a week, and I’m wretched. The rain has driven all the visitors away; Miss Winter has gone home to her friends—I am all alone——”

I interrupted her: “Miss Winter is a paid companion,” I said sharply “Why on earth does Miss Winter want to go away at this very time?”

“Because it’s just at this very time she doesn’t want to stay, I suppose,” replied my little friend. “I couldn’t refuse to let her go when she told me her mother was ill.”

“Her mother’s dead and buried,” said I.

“ Well, I feel sure she’ll write next week to say her mother’s condition prevents her returning.”

“ Good gracious me ! ” said I. “ Do you mean to say you are all alone in this great, ghostly house ? ” We were now standing in the great, ghostly hall. She nodded, pulling up her skirt and rubbing off the wet gravel from the edge of her little shoe on the mat.

“ Where’s the vicar ? ” said I, rubbing my feet impatiently.

“ In the vicarage—so is Mrs. Mildmay. They left all the decoration of the church in my hands—*because I do it so nicely*. They came in once to say how charmingly I was getting on. Wonder they didn’t bring me a bun. We ought to be good friends ; but we’re not. It’s my fault, of course, that we don’t get on. Our rubicon is the weather ; we never go beyond it. Mr. Mildmay is so *dreadfully* sweet-tempered : he agrees with everything you say ; one can’t even quarrel with a man of

that sort, and you hate him the more because you can't. Mrs. Mildmay writes, you know—sends things to the magazines; she doesn't tell whether they come back. She tries to get down to my level; but it's a failure. When I venture to speak of literature, she puts me down with a superior smile, and asks if she shall send me *Myra's Journal* to read—about two years old, you know."

"I know the sort of woman," said I, "and don't like it."

We were still rubbing our shoes on the mat, and we went on rubbing them unconsciously a few seconds more in silence, both occupied with our own thoughts; then, laying her hand on my arm, and looking into my face with her deep, earnest eyes, she said—

"Tell me I ought to be ashamed of myself."

"And welcome, my dear, if you will show me why."

“For having so little self-command,” said she; “for breaking down just when I ought to stand up firmly. It was pleasant enough all the summer, while friends were coming, and the village was full of visitors; but now, when I have done my morning’s duties, and sit down tired, I can’t even fix my attention on a book, but must look at the leaves outside falling—falling with not a sound—till I get frightened, and think I am in a dying world; and, oh! I would give anything if only my dog would say a word to me.” The tears gathered in her eye.

“My child!” said I, in a tone of expostulation.

“I am not a child,” she said, “I am four-and-twenty. That is why it is so humiliating to feel that one is childish. If I am not a woman now, I never shall be.”

“You are a woman, my dear, and that is why you cannot endure this solitude. Woman was no more intended to live alone than man

is. No man would stand it a week—anyhow *I* wouldn't. I knew how it would be, and only last night I said to myself, 'That little lady must not be left there alone.'"

"And that is why you have come ten miles to see me?" she said, her face aglow with gratitude, as she laid her hands on my shoulders.

"Not altogether, my dear," and I gave her another kiss—I've known her since she wore pinafores—"there's a matter of business to be discussed after tea."

"Yes, after tea—not one word before. Oh, we'll have such a long evening! I won't be five minutes changing my dress;" and she ran upstairs, pausing half-way to ask if I had left my trap in the village, and then again, a little further on, asking me to ring the bell and order tea to be made; and I own that for me this childlike excitement over such a trifle as the visit of an old man was pathetic in its signification.

Redlands Court—or, as it is now called, Loevally Court—stands on the brow of a gently-rising hill, from which a noble park sweeps down to the quaint village of Loevally. From the lawn you may see the little harbour, in which nestles a fleet of fishing-boats under the lee of a pier, with a diminutive lighthouse at the end, curving outward into a lunette of dark blue sea. A lovelier site could not have been chosen for the habitation of man, and I doubt if man could have chosen a more hideous habitation for the site—a great square stone building, “embellished,” as they doubtless said at the time it was built, with a row of Doric columns, apparently placed there to support nothing, and for no earthly useful purpose. A house stood there in the sixteenth century, as I know by the title-deeds in my keeping; and a fine specimen of English domestic architecture it must have been, to judge by a wing abutting upon the old church, which was thought good

enough to leave standing to serve for stables and outer offices ; but the main building was pulled down and replaced with the present structure, which stands as a monument to the execrable taste of the last century. There are forty or fifty rooms in it, and some of them cover sufficient space to serve for an ordinary modern villa-residence.

All that side of the house on the east of the great entrance hall was unused ; the doors were locked, and no one had been in the rooms for years past ; only eight or nine rooms on the west side were in use. One of these was divided by the late proprietor with a partition, one part serving as a study and library, the other as a living-room ; and here alone you might forget what a great, ugly, chill barracks of a place the Court was.

CHAPTER II.

TEN MINUTES' RECOLLECTIONS.

I TOLD the maid to set the tea-things in the living-room, and, strolling into the library, threw myself in the easiest chair, and closed my eyes, thinking about Miss Sylvester and this ugly house she lived in—naturally enough. My little friend says she found me asleep there when she came in ; but that could not be, for I have a distinct recollection of putting the history of the Court and its owners into a form—

“—judicious, clear, succinct,

The language plain, and incidents well linked,”

which I could not have done had I been even sleepy I can even now run over the details as they occurred to me, and perhaps there will be no better place in my story than this to do so.

“An ugly house, with an ugly history,”

thought I; "if it had only been a little more picturesque, what a capital story one of these clever novelists might have made with it! Might have got a ghost in if those old gables had been left; but how could a ghost associate with those detestable Doric columns?"

1828—fifty years ago—a long way to go back! Never mind, we can get over fifty years in fifty seconds, perhaps; for I shan't spin my story out as if it were a bill of costs, or make it tedious with attempted fine writing. For you need not expect an old lawyer in his moments of ease to be severely correct, as if he were talking with a ticklish client on formal business. We lawyers unbend like other men, and drop into colloquial phrases easily enough with folks whom we neither fear or dislike. I have no reason to fear or dislike you, my dear reader, so away we go without restraint.

Fifty years ago this house and the country for miles around belonged to the Redlands

family; there are the arms sculptured in that marble chimney-piece (I remember opening my eyes and glaring at it). Loevally at that time was a collection of miserable huts, tenanted by not less miserable fishermen and their wretched families; the farmers on the estate were scarcely better off. The Redlands were always in want of money, and their steward had to grind it out of the tenants somehow. It was not a bad family; they had, and still have, some of the best qualities, but their extravagance and improvidence made them bad landlords, and must have been a source of perpetual discomfort to themselves. They lived beyond their income, and did nothing whatever to improve their estate; they never thought of retrenching, and, as the property deteriorated every year in value, they got into debt, and sank pretty deep in it. When things were about as bad as they could be, Lord Gordon Redlands took to himself a wife. That was characteristic. As soon as he

came home from the honeymoon, he found he must borrow ten thousand pounds from some one to pay off the swarm of minor creditors who threatened to destroy the peace of his young wife's new home. He applied to his friends. There was one who had already displayed unusual generosity. That friend was Robert Sylvester. Robert Sylvester was about the same age as Lord Redlands; he had married at twenty-five; his wife died in giving birth to a son. Three years afterwards he and his friend Lord Redlands fell simultaneously in love with the beautiful daughter of Sir Andrew Peyton. She rejected Sylvester and accepted Lord Redlands. But this did not shake the devotion of Sylvester to his friend; and when, as I say, Lord Redlands made known his pecuniary embarrassment, Sylvester at once came forward, offering to supply him with the money on his note-of-hand. The offer was accepted, and Sylvester drew the money from his banker, and posted over with

the hard cash in his pocket from Bath, where he was then staying. It is possible that his intention got known through the indiscretion of some one in the bank ; anyhow, it is a fact that between Bath and Barnstaple he was attacked by a couple of highwaymen. He was armed, and, succeeding in beating off the rascals, he reached Barnstaple. He rested there that night, and the next day arrived at Redlands Court. It was the first time he had seen Lady Redlands since she rejected him, but nothing in his manner betrayed that he begrudged his friend the happiness he himself had failed to win. The two friends sat up late, for Sylvester was obliged to return to Bath the next day. Before they parted he handed over to Lord Redlands the money he had brought, and received from him acknowledgment in the form of a note-of-hand. Early the next morning the servants found that the house had been broken into during the night, and, going to Lord Redlands' room,

they found him lying dead in his bed beneath the pillow with which he had been suffocated ; the box in which he kept some private papers and had placed the money received from Sylvester was gone. There were marks of heavy footsteps in a flower-bed beneath the window through which the entrance had been made ; a couple of horsemen had been seen early in the morning on the outskirts of Coneyford ; indeed, there was sufficient evidence to prove that the men who took Lord Redlands' life and his money were the same scoundrels who had attacked Sylvester on the Barnstaple Road.

Robert Sylvester was overcome with grief and dismay when the terrible fate of his friend was made known to him ; but, summoning fortitude, he did all that a man should and could do in such circumstances. He called together the friends and relatives of Lord and Lady Redlands to come and console the unhappy young widow, whilst he himself,

animated by that thirst for vengeance which was considerably stronger fifty years ago than it is at present, raised the country in pursuit of the malefactors. There was no telegraph then, and the police system was altogether defective; the culprits got clear off, and no trace of them could be found beyond Coneyford, where it is supposed they got a fishing-boat to carry them off to Wales. Sylvester stayed in the neighbourhood until his friend was buried; then he went away. He left a note for Lady Redlands: when she opened it she found her late husband's note-of-hand to Sylvester for ten thousand pounds, torn in half. "The last service I can offer my dear friend," was written on the paper that enclosed the torn acknowledgment.

No one could deny that Robert Sylvester had behaved throughout like a devoted friend, and this last act of generosity was worthy of such friendship. Unfortunately it did not discharge Lord Redlands' debts to other

creditors, and it was found necessary to sell part of the estate. Lady Redlands had no longer any desire to live at the Court, and that part of the estate including the Court, the park, and the village of Loevally was publicly offered for sale. There were not many offers; but the highest was outbid by Robert Sylvester, and it was knocked down to him at a price considerably beyond its actual value. Three months had passed by since the death of her husband, and Lady Redlands was somewhat recovered from the terrible shock. With the title-deeds in his hand, Robert Sylvester presented himself, and prayed the widow to take them back and be his wife. She refused, telling him that she had resolved never to marry again. Perhaps there was little in his appearance at that time to tempt the young widow to a second marriage. The loss of his friend had produced an effect upon him which testified to the extraordinary affection he bore to Lord Redlands: the

young and genial man had suddenly become old and morose—avoiding society, shunning every kind of amusement. It was said that he never slept, and at times was not master of his reason. He was told by the doctor to whom he applied for opiates to procure sleep and forgetfulness, that the only permanent relief was to be found in an entire change of surroundings. This advice, seconding his disinclination to mingle with former friends, he accepted; and, leaving his child in good hands, he became a traveller, and was no more seen in England.

Now we come to Richard Sylvester, the son of Robert, whose history I have been talking about. The lad was brought up under the care of a wise and kindly old parson in Staffordshire, who taught him the simple duties of a Christian and a gentleman. In due course the lad went to Eton, and thence to Oxford. He was twenty-one when his father, Robert Sylvester, divided his property,

reserving enough for his own requirements, and handing the rest over to his son. With this Richard bought a commission in the army; he went to India, where he distinguished himself, rose to the rank of lieutenant-colonel, and five years after obtained his colonelcy. In 1863 he married, in '64 his daughter Marian was born. Soon after this, he laid down his commission and came to England with his wife, whose health was failing, and their daughter. The colonel was then a fairly rich man; but in '70 a commercial failure left him absolutely penniless, and he was compelled to write to his father for money. Robert Sylvester sent him a couple of hundred pounds for his present necessities, and told him that he was welcome to live at Redlands Court and make what he could out of the estate, but that he must not expect any further pecuniary assistance from him. The man must have lost all tenderness and sunk into the condition of a misanthrope.

Writing from Athens, he said something to this effect (I was looking at the letter only last week) :—" I have given you all that I can afford ; I can give you no more without depriving myself of comforts that I regard as necessary. In this, I consider that I have discharged my parental duties, and see no necessity to do more. The Loevally estate has scarcely paid expenses since it became mine. No tenant has been found for the Court, and the rent collected from the villagers scarcely covers the expenses of repairing their houses. It may be that the man who has charge of the property is dishonest. Get the advice of a decent lawyer who knows the country ; with that, and careful management, you may be able to make a living. I hope you will ; at any rate, there is a roof to shelter you and your family until you see some way out of your present difficulties ; but, in any case, do not bother me with your affairs. I do not wish ever again to write the name of that

place or hear one word about it. Nor need you trouble to answer this letter; I would rather you did not; but, if you do, pray try to avoid all expression of sentiment. We have not seen each other for thirty-three years; then you were too young to know me from any other person. Why should we care more for each other now than then? As a rational being, you, I hope, are proof against the hallucination of false sentiment; and I beg you to believe that I am."

One piece of advice in this precious letter the colonel acted upon immediately—he asked in Coneyford for a respectable lawyer, and was directed to try me. He laid his case before me, showed me the letter from his father, and asked if I would help him. I liked the man from the very first—a fearless, clear-speaking, straightforward man, with deep-set dark eyes, his sunburnt skin lightly lined with the wrinkles that come of mirth and kindliness—and I agreed to help him as best I could. We

went over the estate together. Its condition was pretty nearly as bad as it could be. With thirty years of neglect and bad management, the farm lands had become worthless, and, but for ragged hedges that surrounded them, would have passed for common; not an acre was under cultivation, and the farm-houses were untenanted. Loevally was a miserable collection of tumble-down hovels inhabited by a miserable and squalid community who lived Heaven only knows how. Every storm swept away a portion of the old pier, so that it scarcely afforded protection to the few fishing-boats left of the once respectable fleet.

To restore the place to prosperity, money must be spent upon it. To get money we must mortgage the property or cut down timber. I persuaded the colonel to let us write to his father and ask which he would prefer. In due course he sent the title-deeds of the estate, with a brief and characteristic letter saying that his son was at liberty to

make what use he pleased of them ; that, with regard to the timber, he was perfectly indifferent whether we left the trees standing or cut them down. We raised money on the title-deeds. The colonel spent it wisely and well. He made a few rooms in the Court habitable, and brought his wife there. His daughter he placed in a school at Coneyford, that she might have companions of her own age and condition. Then he repaired the old pier, had the cottages made clean and waterproof, and began to put some of the land under cultivation. He had indomitable courage, and a hopeful, cheerful disposition ; he needed all that in the first years of that uphill fight. His wife was a brave woman, too, accommodating herself cheerfully to the circumstances of her changed position—comforting her husband in little difficulties, making the home sweet and cheerful, seconding his efforts with patient steadfastness—a true help-mate, as a wife should be. While he toiled to

make the land fruitful and the village decent, she strove to make the fishermen and their wives and broods clean and decent, and bring them into a better and happier way of living. Difficult work it was ; for when folks get deeply sunk in misery they lose hope, and with it the wish to rise again. The men only wanted to be left alone ; the women resented the “ prying ways ” of those who sought to know their wants ; the children wouldn’t be washed if they could help it. But just as the colonel, by patient ploughing and harrowing, got the weeds out of the land, and made it yield potatoes in their place, so did his wife clean the hearts of those stubborn human creatures, and plant seed that brought forth good harvest in its season. It was refreshing to see them at work ; and I never left the Court without feeling a greater respect and love for my fellow-creatures. It was a lesson in humanity.

Little by little—though slowly enough at

first to try the patience of Job—the property rose in value. The villagers began to make money—and save it, which was the great thing. Instead of spending all in beer, they contrived to pay some for rent. One year was good for herrings, another was good for potatoes ; tenants came into the estate instead of going out ; and so every year showed a better result than the preceding one ; but the great stroke of fortune came when the line of railway was opened to Coneyford. It brought visitors from London—pleasure-seekers, health-seekers, poets, painters—all sorts and conditions of men, who, astonished by the grandeur of the coast, the beauty of the country, the pure, bracing air that sweeps in from the Atlantic, the quaint picturesqueness of the old village, spread everywhere the praises of Loevally, bringing year by year more visitors. With a generous hand, the colonel and his wife helped the villagers to furnish rooms in their cottages for the accommodation of these folks, raising

them to a state of prosperity that they, or we, had never dreamed of. The rail also opened a fresh outlet for produce; and at length the colonel, after paying off his mortgage, found himself with money in hand. Another servant, a pony and trap to fetch his daughter from Coneyford on Saturday and take her back on Monday—these were the only additions the colonel made to his own expenses. All the surplus money was sunk in improving the property—in building a new pier, a school-house, new roads, etc. In '82 an end came to his happiness: his wife died. Marian, then eighteen, left school, and came home to comfort her father and be his right hand. Bravely she played her part, subduing her own grief to lessen her father's sorrow. The colonel's heart was broken. His health gave way, and slowly he sank and sank.

Marian undertook the duties of the household, and, in addition, charged herself with the management of the estate as her father

became less and less capable of administering his affairs, making herself complete mistress of every detail of the complicated machinery. She astonished me. I 'never could have believed a young woman capable of such an undertaking. But though, towards the latter part of her father's lifetime, she controlled the estate in perfect independence of his help, I doubted if she would have the strength to continue it alone. I spoke to the colonel about it, representing that, in view of accidents, he ought to get his father to make some settlement of the property; for, as he had no legal claim to anything on the estate, he could bequeath nothing to his daughter, and she, at the caprice of her grandfather—who seemed to me little better than a madman—might be turned out of the Court absolutely destitute. "Write to my father if you think it necessary," said he; and accordingly I did write by the very next post. The reply was brief: "As I am not likely to outlive my son—and

don't wish to—the enclosed will may answer all purposes and relieve your minds of uneasiness.” The will, signed and witnessed, was almost as brief: he left everything, real and personal, unconditionally to his granddaughter Marian.

Contrary to his inclination, the old man did outlive his son; for the colonel died in '86; Sylvester being still alive somewhere in Italy in this very autumn of '88.

“Tea has been ready quite ten minutes,” said Miss Sylvester, leaning on the arm of the chair and looking down into my face as I happened to open my eyes.

CHAPTER III.

THE YOUNG LORD REDLANDS.

MY little friend's hair was no longer tumbled and loose, but smoothly brushed back from her white temples and twisted in a close, shining coil upon her head. She had changed her dress also, and now wore what I think is called a tea-gown, of a pretty dark material relieved with some white lace about the throat and wrists. I do not pretend to know anything about such matters, and could not for the life of me give you the particulars of that dress; but I can answer for it that it was made in accordance with the prevailing fashion, for in such affairs she was not superior to her sex, I am happy to say—those who pretend to be being prigs in nine cases out of ten. We sat down to tea, and had a good long chat about trifles—the slight events

that had occurred during the week amongst our small circle of acquaintances : how we got so much pleasant conversation out of such meagre material puzzles me. After all, there are but four strings to a violin ; yet what infinite variety of sounds may be got out of them, and what delight they may afford if one only goes the right way to work !

However, when the pleasant meal came to an end, and I really would not take another cup, there was a short silence, and then Miss Sylvester, with her serious air, said—

“ Now, I suppose, we had better begin to talk about business ? ”

“ Yes,” I replied, looking at my watch ; “ for I may have to get down to the post in time to send off a telegram. Well, my dear, in the first place, I must tell you that I brought over a client with me. I left him in the village, where he intended to dine, if he could find anything to eat at the inn.”

“ Why didn’t you bring him here ? ”

“Because he didn’t seem very anxious to come for one thing, and because I thought we could discuss his affairs with less restraint if he kept away—My client is Lord Redlands.”

(Here in parenthesis I must state that this young man was the grandson of that Lady Redlands to whom Robert Sylvester had offered his hand—she having given birth to a child after her husband’s death.)

“Lord Redlands!” she exclaimed; and then, her surprise giving way to feminine curiosity, “Tell me what sort of a man he is.” A man would have asked, “What has he come about?”

“He’s a handsome young fellow,” said I—“well set-up, good-looking and healthy—what I should call a clean man, one who wouldn’t soil his hands or his conscience for all the world.”

“That’s an equivocal compliment, isn’t it?” said Miss Sylvester, with a smile.

“Perhaps it is; still it conveys my im-

pression. In the matter of soiling his hands he may be too particular; but that's a fault that may be forgiven."

"Is he fair or dark?"

"Fair, but his eyes and hair are dark, so is his beard, and that's trimmed down to a point, and his moustache sweeps out—for all the world like his ancestor in the church yonder—the Elizabethan Redlands with the ruffle, kneeling, with his two boys behind him."

"He must be handsome to resemble him."

"Oh, he is handsome. I was just about to start when he came up, looking as if he had that minute turned out of a club in Pall Mall, not a speck of dust on him. I'll be bound he travelled all the way in a Pullman, despite his debts. I guessed at once who it was, although I had never before seen him—partly by his look, partly because Hanson, the family solicitor, wrote last week telling me he had advised my young lord to come down and

look over the affairs of his estate. I told him I was about to drive over to Loevally, and asked him if he would come with me, and talk about his affairs on the way. You see, my dear, I wished this young fellow to see what a deplorable condition his estate is in."

"Quite right," cried Miss Sylvester; "he ought to know what misery is due to neglect. Pardon me, I will not interrupt you again. Go on."

I proceeded to narrate all that had occurred as nearly as I could recollect.

"As soon as we were out of Coneyford I said to this young man—

"‘Now, sir, tell me all you wish me to know’

"‘There is nothing I wish to conceal, Keene,’ said Lord Redlands. ‘My position is this: my income is between five and six hundred a year, and my expenses are seven or eight.’

“ ‘That means that you are getting into debt,’ said I.

“ ‘Yes,’ said he, ‘I am in debt. My father left all his personal estate, and very properly, to my mother and sisters ; I inherited his real estate—all that is left of the old Redlands property.’

“ ‘And you want to know,’ said I, ‘if that estate can be made to yield eight hundred a year instead of six, and something over and above to pay your outstanding debts.’

“ ‘That is exactly it,’ said he.

“ ‘Well, sir,’ said I, ‘it may be made to pay that ; but money must be spent upon it—pretty freely too—and you will have to wait years for the result.’

“ ‘Meanwhile,’ said he, ‘I am every year increasing my debt. What alternative can you suggest ?’

“ ‘That you should restrict your expenses and live within your income, my lord,’ said I.

“ ‘I don’t know how that’s to be done,’

said he. ‘Of course thousands of men do live upon six hundred a year; but I can’t tell how they do it. I have no children, no wife—I’m not likely to have—no home, no horses; I do not drink, don’t play—don’t do anything—in excess.’

“It was on my tongue to tell him that he didn’t look as if he did anything; but thinking it might seem out of place I held my tongue, and, being then come out of Prior’s Wood, contented myself with pointing over the open country before us and saying—

“‘There’s where your estate begins, my lord.’

“‘I might have known it by its barrenness,’ said he bitterly ‘Why, it’s nothing but a heath.’

“‘There’s plenty of it,’ said I; ‘it stretches away to Loevally—eight miles as the crow flies—and is just about as broad as it’s long. Of course the shooting lets for a fair price.’

“ ‘Is that the sole source of revenue?’ he asked.

“ ‘No,’ said I, ‘there are a few villages dotted over the estate. We are coming to one at the foot of this hollow’

“ ‘I had purposely driven out of the way to go through Yesterham. When we had passed through the straggling row of hovels, stopping midway for a squalid woman to carry a bandy child out of the road, he said—

“ ‘Are those places mine?’

“ ‘Yes,’ said I; ‘there are eighteen cottages and three beer-shops. Your beer-shops pay well; you can’t expect the others to yield much. Indeed, I don’t see how the tenants could pay anything if we were strict about the game.’

“ ‘They pay their rent by poaching on my own land?’ said he.

“ ‘Roughly speaking, they do,’ said I; ‘but I will say this for them: when they get the chance they poach on your neighbour’s preserves.’

“ He made no reply

“ I drove on till we came to the cross roads, and then pulling up, I said—

“ ‘ There are two ways to Loevally, my lord. That one takes us down through Black Rock Gap—another of your villages. It *was* a prosperous little village, especially in the herring seasons ; but their breakwaters are washed away, there’s no protection for the boats, and the fleet has dwindled down to a couple of crazy boats that ought never to be allowed to put out to sea. How the poor wretches there get a subsistence I can’t tell. That’s the short way——’

“ ‘ Then for Heaven’s sake let us go the long way ! ’ he cried. ‘ I feel as if I were responsible for the existence of this misery.’

“ ‘ So you are, morally,’ said I. ‘ If you kept cattle in an unhealthy condition and let them stray into your neighbours’ lands in search of food you would be punished.’

“ ‘ You are a plain speaker, Mr. Keene,’

said he, with a flush of colour in his fair cheek.

“ ‘ One must be silent or speak the truth, and there’s only one way of doing that,’ said I.

“ After that we went on in silence for a good way, still jogging along through the barren country. I wanted my words to sink into his mind. He was the first to break silence. Coming to cultivated land he said—

“ ‘ At last, there’s something pleasant to look at. Look at that stubble—there must have been good crops here, Keene.’

“ ‘ Excellent, my lord,’ said I; ‘ couldn’t be better. *We’ve just passed the boundary of your estate.*’

“ His countenance fell.

“ ‘ This was all Redlands at one time; but these lands were sold to Mr. Sylvester fifty years ago.’

“ ‘ All that was worth selling,’ said he.

“ ‘ No; it was more valuable because the



"A LOOK DOWN THERE, MY LORD!" (p. 45).

Court and park stood on it; but I am told the land itself is not a bit richer than the rest. The ground you see now covered with good crops was as ragged a waste as the land beyond—twenty years ago. I know that from my own observation; but while this property has gone up in value by leaps and bounds, yours has gone steadily sinking back to savage waste. Look down there, my lord,' said I, pulling up at an opening whence we got a glimpse of the village. 'There lies Loevally. That film of blue smoke hanging over it speaks of cheerful hearths and well-served tables, the crowded smacks in the harbour represent independence and prosperity. Well, twenty years ago that village was no better than Black Rock Gap, where your tenants are glad to feed on potatoes rejected here as unfit for pigs. The wealth of this estate, its growing prosperity, the contentment, independence, and happiness of all who live upon it, are due to the efforts of Colonel Sylvester. Now, my

lord, you are no worse off than he was when he set his hand to this good work. You are less embarrassed, for you have no delicate wife and young child to consider; why in the name of reason and common sense should you not do as he did—live on your estate and regenerate the fallen fortunes of your house?’

“‘Because,’ said he, ‘I am not Colonel Sylvester. He was a man of character, a man of decision and action, whilst I——’ He shrugged his shoulders to signify that he had none of these qualities. I was about to remonstrate, for a man may form the mere habit of doing nothing—may cease to believe that he can do anything; but he interrupted me. ‘No, Keene, you mistake my character; I could not endure a solitary life; I should hang myself at the end of a month. It requires a man of strong will and set purpose for such an undertaking.’

“‘Pardon me,’ said I, ‘this estate has been managed by the colonel’s daughter since his

death, and has suffered nothing in consequence. She lives alone at the Court.'

" 'I have not even the qualities of a strong-minded woman,' said he, and a certain curve of his lip seemed to signify that he was rather glad he had not. 'Let those who are qualified for such work undertake it; I am not; there are plenty who are. You must sell the place, Keene.'

" 'That won't give you eight hundred a year and clear your debts,' said I.

" 'No matter,' said he sharply 'Sell the place for what it will fetch—and at once. That story of the poor wretches who feed on diseased potatoes—I can think of nothing else, and I shall not while the place is mine.'

" 'It's ruin,' said I—he turned his head impatiently 'You will not get the honest value of it, if you sell now—unless Miss Sylvester chose to buy it.'

" 'I do not wish to receive any favour from the Sylvesters,' he said quickly.

“ ‘ You are not likely to get a penny-piece more than the value of the land from her,’ said I. ‘ If I propose it to my client, it is because I feel sure it will be a profitable investment, and because there is no one who could make such good use of the property ’

“ And now, my dear,” said I—addressing Miss Sylvester, when I had come to the end of my story—“ it is for you to say whether you will buy up the estate and help this young fellow out of his difficulties or not.”

“ Yes,” said she quietly, with a very serious expression on her young face, as she drew together with her little fingers the crumbs under her hand.

“ Of course, it will give you more work than ever,” said I, after a minute or two.

“ I’m not afraid of that ; I should like it ”—still collecting the crumbs.

“ We could raise the money on your title-deeds—there would be no difficulty about payment.”

“No; you could arrange all that for me,” said she.

“Of course.” Then there was another pause. She had a pretty good heap of crumbs by this time. “Perhaps,” said I, “you do not feel more disposed to help this young man than he to receive your favour.”

She scattered the heap of crumbs by a backward sweep of her little finger, rested her elbow on the table and her cheek on her hand, and said, raising her eyes to mine—

“I have no reason to dislike him.”

“Nor he you,” said I. “His family is indebted to your grandfather for a nice little gift of ten thousand pounds.”

“I hope you did not tell him that. Pray don’t,” she added, as I shook my head; “he would hate me more than ever.”

“How do you know he hates you, my dear?”

“By putting myself in his place. If

I found I could not manage the estate, and had to give up all and go and get my living as a governess, do you think I should feel amiably disposed towards those who took my place and managed better? Fancy coming down here as a visitor and a stranger, finding everything changed, myself forgotten by the people who loved my father, nothing left to me of all that I was proud of and fond of—all gone to another. Do you think I could like that other? No; I should be the first to think ill of him, and put ill constructions on his motives. Did you tell him how old I was?"

"No; I said you were a most estimable young woman, that's all."

She laughed, and said—

"I know exactly the sort of woman he pictures me: one of those clever managing women, gaunt and forty, with a wisp of hair sticking out behind, a salvation bonnet, and spectacles, sharp features, and thinner even

than I am; dressed eccentrically—one of those poor souls that *Punch* makes fun of. But,” growing suddenly grave again, “I was not thinking of myself or that side of the question. I was thinking how unhappy this poor Lord Redlands must be, doing nothing, hoping for nothing, having no object in life but to kill time. In a merely material sense his life must be miserable; it would be just as hard for him to deprive himself of good cigars as it would be for me to go without magazines or papers.”

This young woman’s habit of putting herself in other people’s places made her wonderfully lenient to their faults and generous in judgment.

“And it seemed to me,” she pursued, “such a pity that I should take this chance of happiness out of his hands, this possibility of getting back his fortune and winning contentment with it, and some higher kind of self-congratulation. It is a pity to see a man sink

down like this. I don't know; we may laugh at these idle noble families and their follies, but the subject has a pathetic side all the same. The Redlands did well for their country once, and held a high place in the affection of their fellow-creatures, and it's sad to think they should die out and be forgotten."

"My dear, it is a law of nature that all useless creatures should die out."

"Yes; but it's against the law of nature that a man should be useless," she replied quickly, and with a bright flash of her fine, intelligent eyes.

"Only the phoenix rises from its ashes," said I; "and, believe me, Lord Redlands is not a phoenix, but only an ordinary idle gentleman."

I looked at my watch, and Miss Sylvester, taking the hint, changed her manner, and coming at once to the point in question, said—

“Of course I will take the estate if you see no practical objection.”

“One objection only occurred to me,” said I. “The sum you are about to invest is no trifle. Old Sylvester gave your father permission to do what he liked with the estate so long as he did not bother him with the details, and I have no doubt he would be as well pleased for you to spare him any trouble on the same condition. Still, as this is a serious matter, and the first you have undertaken, I think it will be well to ask his permission.”

“Yes, yes ; by all means. I did not think of that ; but it will cause delay ”

“Not much. We will not weary the old gentleman with a long letter of explanation—a brief telegram will suit his taste better, he can read it at a glance and reply in one word. That is why I looked at my watch. If I start at once I may send the telegram to-night. Seven o’clock”—looking at my watch again as I rose—“it is not probable that we shall get

an answer to-night ; but on Monday morning you may expect it. Send on word to me when it arrives, and I will drive over at once and conclude arrangements with young Redlands.”

With this, I hurriedly took leave of my little friend, and went down to the post office in Loevally, where I was in time to send this message to old Sylvester, who was then at Amalfi, in Italy—

“Do you consent to Miss Sylvester purchasing the remainder of the Redlands estate for twelve thousand pounds, to be raised on the deeds now in her hands ?”

Then I went to the Old Inn, where I found Lord Redlands trying to amuse himself with a county newspaper. I told him what I had done, and advised him to stay in Loevally until we got an answer from old Sylvester.

“I suppose I had better,” he said, in a tone of resignation. He summoned the waiter and gave him half-a-sovereign to fetch his valise from Coneyford. No one else would have given more than five shillings for the job.

CHAPTER IV

IMPRESSIONS.



MRS. HILLMAY.

WHEN I was gone my little friend sat down and had "a good think," she tells me, and feeling very much more cheerful and happy for my visit, she is pleased to add, The real cause of her exhilaration was the new appeal to her heart, the new call

upon her energy and faculties in behalf of the poor starving creatures on the Redlands estate. It was just what she wanted, said she inwardly ; it took her out of herself, and gave her

something more deserving of solicitude than her own petty grievances. With so much to do, such serious questions to consider, it was really fortunate that she was alone at the Court and had no summer friends to entertain.

How strangely our lives are guided into unlooked-for channels—always the most unlikely things happening! Often and often she had built up romantic day-dreams about that Redlands estate—being still of an age to foster pleasant illusions—settling what she would do with it, if it were only hers, how she might reclaim it as her father had reclaimed Loevally, covering the barren land with plenty, and rescuing the unhappy dwellers on it from misery and the prison and the workhouse, to set them up happily in decent homes. But she had never thought that her dream might be realised, because it was a dream. And now it really was to be. She might consider the estate already hers, for that application to her

grandfather for permission was a mere form. As soon as his answer came she must begin work—not a day, not an hour, must be lost ; the answer would arrive on Monday morning, and she must have her plans ready and in order to begin.

This reflection bringing Miss Sylvester to practical consideration of an immediate kind, she carried her lamp into the library, and set herself to read up all the information she could get upon certain subjects of primary importance in the undertaking. And here sat this excellent young woman in the stillness and silence of a lonely country house, when the last servant had gone to bed, surrounded by heavy encyclopædias and technical works, reading steadily on, with a pencil in her hand and a note-book by her side, long after the hour when most young ladies would have laid aside the most enthralling romance to seek repose.

At length it occurred to her that there was

still something to be done in the church before service began the next morning; then she lit her candle and went up the broad dark staircase and into her own great ghostly bedroom, and soon afterwards laid herself down to sleep, and, I warrant, dreamt of nothing more frivolous than lime-burning, ensilage, and matters of that kind.

It looked damp and raw when she peeped out of her window the next morning, so she put on her old stuff dress to go into the church, for no one would be about at that hour. There having arranged the fresh-cut flowers she had brought from the conservatory, and taken a glance round to see that everything was as nice as she could wish it, she seated herself before the harmonium to try over the hymns that had been selected for the day.

About this time Lord Redlands came down from his room at the inn, glanced through the open door at the murky day, and, looking at his watch, said to himself—

“Detestable morning. Half-past eight. Nothing to see from the pier. Breakfast won’t be ready for half an hour. There are monuments in the church that I ought to see, I suppose ; though if my poor old ancestors have crumbled away with their fortunes, it will not be a cheerful spectacle. I’ll go and have a look at them ; there’ll be nobody there at this hour.”

He put on his hat and strode off to the church, up the hill, and by the road that skirted the park—the first lord of Redlands, perhaps, that had found himself walking of necessity on the outside of that park. He came to the church door, and found it fastened ; it had not struck him before that, there being no one there, this would probably be the case.

“No place for me even in the church,” thought he ; “I must go back again.”

Just then his ear caught the sound of the harmonium within.

“Some one in there. If it’s only an

organist, I don't mind. One of the doors must be open ; which ? ”

He walked round the church. There was a key in the little door of the tower ; he lifted the latch and walked in.

Everything that Miss Sylvester undertook she did thoroughly and earnestly ; this simple hymn was as serious a business to her as a sonata of Beethoven ; bending over the closely-printed book, and softly humming an accompaniment to the air she played, she took no notice of the door being tried, and saw nothing of Lord Redlands until he was almost before her, as he walked slowly down the nave, with his hat and his hands behind him. She knew who it was at once ; he was just as she had pictured him in her imagination ; he was too good-looking to be anybody else.

It took her breath away with surprise to see him there, and she ceased to hum the hymn ; at the same time, her fingers, paralysed for the moment, rested on a horrid squeaky

note that whistled out shrilly as if purposely to attract the visitor's attention—the very last thing in the world she could have wished just then, for she was conscious that her nose was red, and that she must look a terrible little guy. Indeed, it required all Redlands' self-command to repress a smile as, assailed by that sustained flute note, he turned and saw a long thin little face, with wide-opened eyes, looking in astonishment at him over the harmonium from under the brim of that old summer hat, that seemed to bury her little head, and looked like nothing but an enormous extinguisher.

“If I disturb you——” Redlands began, with a slight bow

“Oh, not in the least,” she hurried to say. “Pray take no notice of me.” Discovering that she had still her finger on that abominable note, she creased her brows in anger at her own stupidity, and blushed to think what an awkward little fool he must think her.

Then bending over her music, so that he could see nothing but her hat, she set herself to go on with her work like a rational being, and as if the visitor were no more than the pew-opener or any one else. It was a simple air she was trying over, but she had to screw her attention to it, all the same; after going through it twice, she felt she could play it over and over again mechanically without looking at her notes; then she permitted her eyes to stray down the chancel. The young man was looking at the beautifully-carved stalls; he passed on, looked up, and then paused. A tablet on the wall recorded how his great-grandfather fell at the siege of Badajoz in 1812, mourned by his family, regretted by his King, and honoured by his country. A little further on he paused again, to read the glowing eulogy in redundant Latin upon a still earlier Redlands—figured above with a high front and a flowing wig—who, respected alike for his public services as a just and learned judge,



"IF I DISTURB YOU——" REDLANDS BEGAN" (p. 61).

and his domestic virtues as a benevolent friend to the poor and a most loving parent, died in 1760. Another step brought him to the memorial of another Redlands, who, admired in the field of literature as an elegant writer and astute historian, and beloved by all who “enjoyed his patronage” and shared his affection, died in 1704. Then he came to the monument where his Elizabethan ancestor is represented in life-size effigy, his four sons kneeling behind him, facing his wife and her three daughters, to read how Sir Geoffrey Talbot, Knight of Redlands, after sailing with Drake in his memorable voyage about the world, and furnishing two ships to meet the Spanish enemy (himself fighting them, to his own honour and the glory of his mistress the Queen), died full of years peacefully at Redlands Court in 1599.

A ray of light from the window beyond fell on the young man’s face, seeming to reflect upon him some of the glory of that ancestor.

He could not look upon that monument without exultant pride to think he came of such a stock; it must have made the blood tingle in his veins and his heart beat quicker to see how, generation after generation, the Talbots of Redlands had lived and died bravely and well. So thought Marian, and she thought she saw in his sunlit face that joy and pride with which her own heart leapt in generous sympathy.

“ Oh ! if I were only a man,” thought this enthusiastic little lady, “ now, I would go up to him and shake hands with him.” But she was only a young woman, and so, as he turned about, she had to drop her eyes.

Still playing the same air over and over again, she kept her eyes down until she felt he was near her; then she looked up—not thinking of herself now and what a queer little fright she looked in that old hat, but anxious to exchange one look with the young man in whom she had taken such deep interest. He

was quite close ; but he passed by, taking no notice of her whatever. The sunlight was no longer on his face, and all its happiness and exulting pride was gone. He looked straight before him, seeing nothing, probably hearing nothing. Marian was quite out of the range of his thoughts, or he would certainly not have neglected to bow in passing.

“Poor fellow !” thought she ; “he is perhaps thinking, ‘If I fell, who would know what had become of the last of the Redlands ? And who would care ? What have I done—what can I do that any one should think kindly of me, living or dead ?’ ” She watched him go up the nave and pass out of the church ; then her hands slipped from the keyboard into her lap, and she gave her whole thought to him.

If she could persuade him to seize the golden opportunity he was throwing away—if she could inspire him with that hope which had given her new life since last night,

willingly—with all her heart—she would relinquish the advantages that chance offered her. Oh, she had enough to do without that; and if she had not, she could soon find something to take her out of herself, and make her forget her loneliness. That was nothing. Every one is low-spirited at times, whether she is alone or has friends about her. When the weather changed—when the first bright frosty morning came—she would be cheerful enough! That was not the question: the difficulty was how to approach this poor Lord Redlands. If she could obtain an introduction to him—which was unlikely enough, in face of his avowed disinclination—it would still be impossible for her to tell him what she thought and felt upon this subject. He would set her down at once for an impertinent, self-sufficient, presumptuous, conceited busy-body. That would not matter to her a bit, but she saw clearly enough that he would never act upon advice offered by a person of whom he

held such an opinion. Yet, who else could approach him? There was only Mr. Keene, and he had already failed, after doing his best — “And a very poor job he made of it,” I fancy she must have said to herself, though she never included this in afterwards confessing her feelings and thoughts to me.

How she regretted that she had not her wits about her when he spoke! She might so easily have offered to show him what was worth seeing in the church, and in that way have introduced herself, and overcome in some measure his prejudice against her: a prejudice that she felt was unmerited. That opportunity was gone, and would not come again. To-morrow the telegram would come from her grandfather, and the young man, sick of Loevally, would be only too glad to go away at once. Then, his estate being all gone, to the last acre, he would never come again. In all probability she should never more see that

face, for it was scarcely likely that he would attend service.

Contrary to her expectation, Redlands did attend service in the evening, coming in just as she had finished the voluntary, and dropping quietly into the first vacant seat he came to. When the congregation rose she could see his head above the rest; she could not help looking that way now and then, but she never found him looking towards her.

Nevertheless, he had cast one glance at her, saying to himself, "Ah, that must be the queer little thing I found here this morning." But he had no notion that it might be Miss Sylvester, she was so completely unlike the conception he had formed of her. Moreover, on first entering, he had caught sight of a lady whom he settled at once was Miss Sylvester; she exactly realised his preconceived idea.

This lady sat quite alone in the chancel, occupying one of the stalls near the pulpit. She was an assertively imperious young

woman of about thirty, bold and showy, with particularly white hands, of which she made considerable show, for they were ungloved, resting her elbows on the desk before her, and changing the position of her clasped palms from time to time, in order to display the sparkling stones in the rings with which her fingers were plentifully adorned. He never for a moment doubted that this was the mistress of Loevally. The very fact of her sitting apart in solitary state proclaimed it, and her self-complacency and ostentation supported the claim that she herself evidently entertained to a position of complete and exclusive superiority.

He could not get his eyes away from her. At first he was amused by the fatuous vanity of the woman; he thought it not unlikely that she had expected he would be there, and had specially prepared herself to dazzle him; but after awhile, disgusted with her obtrusive vulgarity, he became exasperated to think

that henceforth she was to be the sole representative of the fine old family who had founded Redlands.

So while Miss Sylvester was glancing at him with growing interest and compassionate tenderness, he was scowling at some one else, with a growing hatred for the very name of Sylvester.

He could hardly sit out the service, and was the first to leave the church, which he did vowing to himself that he would never willingly see Miss Sylvester again, or exchange two words with her, no matter how many negotiations might call for them.

As a matter of fact, the woman for whom he entertained such a decidedly lively abhorrence was, as I have shown, not Miss Sylvester at all, but the masterful wife of the meek vicar, who writes, I am told, best part of his sermons for him, and spends three-fourths of his income.

CHAPTER V

MISS SYLVESTER IN A NEW CHARACTER.

MISS SYLVESTER waited within-doors until ten o'clock the next morning; and then, as no telegram had come, she thought she ought to send me a message, that I might not come over to Loevally unnecessarily. She determined to go down to the post herself, although there was a drifting fall of thin rain that made going out of doors untempting. Perhaps she thought she might possibly meet Lord Redlands: who knows?

She put on her thick boots, a waterproof, and a bonnet that couldn't be spoilt, and trudged off. There was not a soul to be seen in the one street of Loevally, nor even a face at the window of the Old Inn.

"Has any telegram come for me?" she asked at the post-office.

“No, miss; nothing has come for anybody,” was the reply

She wrote a message to me, and sent it off. Then she entered into conversation with the young woman who managed the postal affairs, and kept the fancy shop to which the post-office was attached.

“Mother’s awful bad, miss,” said the young woman, “and I’m terrible anxious about her. Doctor says she oughtn’t to be left; but, you see, George has gone with the mail to Barington, and won’t be back this two hours, and though mother only lives three doors off, I can’t be there and here too at the same time. I could leave the shop, for there’s not likely to be any customers such a day as this, but there’s the post——”

“Go to your mother,” said Marian on the instant. “I can sit here as well as anywhere else. I am expecting a telegram; if the bell rings I will fetch you.”

After protesting that “she really couldn’t,”

“she didn’t like to,” “it was really too good,” and so on, the young woman ran off to attend to her mother, while Miss Sylvester, laying aside her waterproof and bonnet, seated herself behind the counter, took up the stocking and needles laid down by the postmistress, and was presently knitting away as if she had no other occupation in the world.

This was no unusual proceeding on her part; she did not know what pride of the false and contemptible kind was. It would have been more in keeping with conventional notions of propriety, perhaps, if she had gone to nurse the woman’s mother instead of minding her shop, but that would have been less kind to the woman, and maybe less agreeable to herself, despite the poetry that surrounds a sick-bed.

There was not much light in the shop, for all the windows in Loevally are more or less overgrown with Virginia creepers and fuchsias, therefore she had to bend low over her work,

so that it took her altogether by surprise when some one stalked up to the counter, and asked in a clear, full voice—

“Have you anything for George Talbot?”

She looked up and saw Lord Redlands before her. It took away her breath.

“I have been expecting a telegram,” he explained, seeing that she looked amazed: “a telegram from Coneyford.”

“Yes—that is, no,” she said, in confusion.

He smiled. “Are you sure that ‘no’ is not ‘yes’?” he asked.

“When I said yes, I meant that I understood you expected a telegram; when I said no, I meant that none had come in to-day.”

“You have made it clear now. Thank you,” said he, still smiling pleasantly, for he liked the look of this simple little body, blushing and confused with her blunder. It was an intelligent face, if not pretty, and, above all things, sweet in its possibilities—the sort of face a man would like to see in

his home, if he had one. Nice to have a little sister with a face like that.

“If anything comes, will you send it up to the inn, sharp?” he asked.

“Oh, yes,” said she, rising from her chair, and letting her work and a clattering pair of scissors fall, “directly.”

He nodded and smiled, and said, “Good morning,” then marched to the door.

“What a little idiot I am!” thought Miss Sylvester, seeing this, her second golden opportunity, slip away more shamefully than the first.

“Well, this is too much of a good thing,” exclaimed Redlands, stopping short on the threshold and looking out at the rain, which had suddenly changed from a fluctuating drizzle to a determined downpour. “I will stand up here awhile,” he said, turning about, “unless I block out all the daylight.”

“Oh, I can see very well to do such work as this,” replied Marian, getting her needles

into order, and trying to look as if she were not pleased, or unsettled, or anything else which she ought not to be under such conditions.

As most of the light came through the doorway, Redlands came further in, which had another advantage in bringing him closer to the pleasant little body. He had scarcely spoken a word since I left him on Saturday; it was quite refreshing to think of talking to some one who seemed simple and human.

When she had got her needles well in hand, she glanced up at him before setting to work. He seemed to know the look of those large dark eyes.

"Surely," said he, with sudden recollection, "you are the lady I saw yesterday morning in the church—you play the organ there?"

"I play the harmonium."

"And you keep the post, mind shop, and knit stockings?"

“Why,” said she, at last grasping the chance, “how dull our life would be if we had no occupation !”

“Yes,” said he, with a dismal drop in his voice, “it is dull.”

“Whereas,” she went on, determined to follow up her advantage, “if we only knit stockings it is something done.”

“What a cheerful, sunny disposition the girl has !” thought he, looking down at the bent head and nimble, slender fingers ; but as he said nothing, she feared she was going too quick, and so added quietly, “I don’t know what we should do without knitting in the winter. In the summer we are occupied with the visitors who take our rooms—they want so much attention ; but when the season is over, this keeps us employed. It is just the thing we wanted. Two years ago only one or two women knew how to knit, but now we are all busy—as much as we can do. Gentlemen give us orders, for these stockings wear a

long while, and we sell them as cheap as we can."

"I think you are the busiest little lady in Loevally," he said, following his own train of thought rather than hers.

"Oh, if you went into the cottages you would find there women just as busy as I."

"But the men—they seem to be the laziest set I ever met with. I came here on Saturday, and I have not seen a single boat put out."

"There is no market for fish on Sunday, and to-day is so wet."

He laughed. "That seems an odd excuse for fishermen."

"They are old men and boys who stay here; and I don't see why they should not take care of themselves as well as other people—when it rains."

She looked up into his face as she spoke, so that he could not doubt the thrust was meant for him. He liked the fearless look with a flash of mischief in her eyes.

“True,” said he; “I suppose they have as much right to be idle as any one else.”

“If any one *has* a right to be idle,” she added, going on busily with her needles.

“Some assuredly have. There are cases in which it is our duty to do nothing,” said he.

She laid her work in her lap, and looked up in wonder.

“What wonderfully changeful pretty eyes they are,” he thought.

“I cannot understand that,” she said—
“cannot imagine any such case.”

“Supposing I took up your work and attempted to finish it,” said he, smiling; “in all probability I should make such a tangle of it that you would have to undo all and begin again—proving that I should have done better to leave it alone.”

She laughed. “That only proves,” said she, “that you cannot knit stockings.” Then, with sudden pathos she added, “Oh, I am

sure you could do something infinitely better than that."

That look thrilled him with a feeling to which he was a stranger. There was a deep, tender eagerness in it that told him she knew what the burden was that made him weary of life, and would, if she could, take it on her own slight shoulders.

"I wish," said he, with an earnestness that was also new to him—"I wish you would tell me what I can do. I believe you know me, and have not been speaking on this subject without a purpose."

"Yes," she said quietly. "I know who you are. I knew you when I saw you in the chancel; I imagined what was in your mind that made you forget me as you passed up the nave to go away. I have thought of it since; and I have been speaking with a purpose. You ask what you can do? Go to Black Rock Gap, and you will find the answer there."

He shook his head. "It is a parallel case

to the knitting," he said. "I should find work there that will be far better done by somebody else."

"There is work there that none can do so well as you."

"That is your opinion; but do you think any one less generously disposed—Miss Sylvester, for example—would think as you do?"

"Yes."

"I don't," said he emphatically.

"Do you think you ought to say that of one you do not know?"

"I *do* know her—as much as I wish to," he answered sharply, thinking of the woman sitting alone and making a show of her finery. "I saw her last night in the chancel, and unless she is a consummate actress, I am not wrong in believing her to be a vulgar, affected——" He checked himself suddenly, and added, "But I am certainly wrong in saying this behind her back."

Miss Sylvester was amused, as well she might be, by this mistake; in addition she was not displeased with Lord Redlands' opinion of the vicar's wife, for she had her womanly failings, this little Miss Sylvester, and was as pleased as you or I might be to find the object of dislike hated by somebody else.

"Would you say this to Miss Sylvester's face?" she asked.

"I should find it difficult to conceal my opinion if I had the misfortune to be brought in contact with her," he replied.

As she did not reply, he said presently—

"I should like to know what is passing in your mind."

"I was thinking," said she, "that here is the case of knitting stockings reversed. You have expressed contempt for Miss Sylvester, which proves that you have qualities higher than hers—for one can despise only those whom we recognise as being lower in thought and feeling than ourselves. Then why should you

permit her to do that which you are better able to perform?"

"In a practical sense she is undoubtedly better than I am."

"Our practice is governed by our principle, it seems to me," she said, still working steadily on; for that occupation enabled her to concentrate her thoughts on the subject, and gave her more scope for reflection than if she had been looking in his face to divine what was in his thoughts. "And if our principle is wrong our practice cannot be right—morally"

Her reasoning astonished him, as well it might, considering, as he did, that she was only, at best, a fairly-instructed intelligent villager. "Where on earth did she get all her ideas?" he wondered. After a pause, he said—

"I should not know how to begin. Certainly you must have thought more about this subject than I have. You have settled in

your own mind what you would do in my place, haven't you?"

"Yes," said she quietly, "I have. But my notions are only a woman's, and may be no better than Miss Sylvester's. Still, I could tell you how to begin."

"Tell me."

"Do as I suggested just now: go over there and see what is to be done."

He hesitated.

"It is less than an hour's walk," said she, looking up, "and the rain has ceased." Then fixing her eyes on him earnestly, "If you asked me to do this for you, I would do it; or if I thought I could do you a service, I would go there without being asked."

"Will it please you if I go?" he asked.

"Yes. You cannot tell how greatly it will please me," she answered.

"Then I will go."

She dropped her work, and, rising, offered him her hand. He took it in silence, an un-

pleasant suspicion crossing his mind that this young person, under her simplicity, was a crafty little coquette. Was her temerity the result of *naïve* simplicity, or was it the result of receiving a good deal of attention from gentlemen visitors to Loevally? The latter was not unlikely, for she had an intelligence very much beyond the range of even well-educated girls; and now he came to look at her, he was surprised to find how pretty she was. And her ways were winning—fascinating beyond those of any woman he remembered to have met.

He did not like the notion that she was a flirt—a symptom of jealousy that showed the dawn of strong liking for her; it was unpleasant to think that idle fellows had come there before him, and spent hours in chatting with the little postmistress. Of course, as postmistress she would be always there for any one to drop in and amuse himself with.

“If I don’t see my way to doing good work after my visit, what then?” he asked.

“Then,” said she, “I can but let you know what I thought of doing.”

“Good,” said he, but not over-cheerfully; but that same unpleasant suspicion led him to think she was but contriving the means for further interviews, with a possible flirtation to follow. “Of course, I shall find you here?”

“No,” said she; “I am only staying here while the postmistress is away with her mother. She will be back soon, and possibly you will never find me here again.”

He brightened up at this. “Then where may I find you?” he asked.

She reflected a minute. “Do you know the schoolrooms?” she asked.

“The new building beyond the church? yes.”

“Well, my class is over at four, and then I leave.”

“Oh,” thought he, more cheerfully than ever, “she is the schoolmistress: that accounts for her playing the organ in the church, and her intelligence, and all that!”

“I shall be at the schoolroom door at four,” said he; then he offered his hand, and they said good-bye—with bright happiness shining in their eyes; and he hurried off, with the strangest feeling in the world giving elasticity to his steps and animation to his mind. It never struck him that what he was doing now he would have regarded as absurdly impossible an hour before.

CHAPTER VI.

WHAT CAME OF REDLANDS' VISIT TO THE GAP.

WHAT Marian's feelings were she never confessed to me—indeed, I own to having supplied more than one hiatus in the narratives of these two young people—she only tells me that “just then” the bell began to tingle in the little room adjoining, and she had to go and fetch the postmistress to take the telegram from the wire.

It was from old Sylvester, addressed to Marian Sylvester, Loevally Court, dated November 20th, Amalfi, and ran thus:—

“I will come and decide the point in question. Shall probably arrive at Loevally about the 28th. Will telegraph when I reach England.”

Miss Sylvester was at first simply astonished. This was, of all things, the most unlooked-for. To think that this old man—over eighty—after fifty years' absence from

England, should undertake a fatiguing journey from the south of Italy—an invalid going north when all others were going south—was, indeed, surprising, and hardly to be explained by the fact that he was undoubtedly eccentric. It could not be merely to settle the financial question that he came; again and again he had made it clear that he took no interest in the estate whatever, and washed his hands of it entirely. What, then, could be his motive? There was but one conclusion: that just as the flame of a candle flickers up before dying out, some flash of human sentiment had animated the old man's heart, and warmed it with a desire to look once more upon his native country, and to see his son's child before he died.

With this hope Marian's responsive heart glowed with pleasure, and she at once began to revolve in her mind what rooms she should prepare for her grandfather, what means she should take to insure his comfort and satisfac-

tion. First of all, she must let me know; so she wrote out the text of her grandfather's telegram, in doing which she was reminded that now it would be impossible to conclude the purchase of Redlands before old Sylvester's arrival; and I dare say this reflection gave her quite as much delight as the prospect of meeting her grandfather.

Meanwhile, Lord Redlands was making his way to Black Rock Gap—and a very bad way he found it when he got off the high road and well on to his own estate—the ragged road no better than a watercourse, and the land on either side covered with a tangled growth of briar and brake, that only a poacher could make his way through. Down he went into the Gap, stepping as neatly as he could from stone to stone in avoiding the pools of stagnant slush and the stream of muddy water, until he came to a turn whence one gets a fairly comprehensive bird's-eye view of the village. There lay the thatched cottages

huddled together in the hollow between two bold rugged hills, the beach below with the two boats stranded ; a crumbling mass of stonework stood out of the sea, showing where once the pier had formed a harbour for the craft ; beyond, the grey sea spread out into the grey mist. An artist would have gone into raptures over the scene ; it took every bit of courage and hope out of poor Redlands' heart. Was there any need to go any further, to examine the thing closer ? He knew that every one of those cottages was a foul den of misery ; he knew that the one thin streak of blue smoke rose from the chimney of his beer-house ; at the very thought of it he seemed to smell the reek of stale beer and filthy tobacco. Was there any necessity to look at the people who dwelt there, to know that they were squalid and brutal ?—at those boats, to know that they were rotten and unseaworthy ?—at that butt-end of a breakwater, to know that it no longer afforded protection from the sweeping

waves? No ; he realised fully all the misery and wretchedness and desolation of those unhappy creatures, who had lost the last spark of hope that animates mankind to forsake the bad and seek better. But for shame in the consciousness that he was responsible for this state of things, he could have laughed at the idea of his coming hither at the bidding of a pretty little schoolmistress to reform it. What could he do? He might raise money, perhaps, to rebuild the pier, to furnish seaworthy boats, to make the houses decently habitable. But this was not sufficient ; the men must be weaned from thieving and sotting ; they must be persuaded to lead sober and industrious lives ; the women must be taught to keep their homes in a state of decency ; the children must be sent to school. How could he do all this? It was absurdly impossible. Even in the simple matter of spending money on necessary building and the like, a person accustomed to such matters

—like Miss Sylvester—could get more for her money and do the thing better than he. Why on earth should he stand in her way, and make a fool of himself to no purpose?

However, he had promised to go into the village, and he was not a man to break his word, even when no good was to be done by keeping it and the work it involved was to the last degree unpleasant. Down he went into the thick of it, and found the condition of the people rather worse than he expected. Dirt, decay, and evil odours all around; not a soul usefully employed anywhere to be seen. The dull, heavy men seated of a row on a spar outside the beer-house scarcely troubled themselves to look at him; three women disputing at a cottage door stopped their discussion to gape and then laugh at him; a boy from the safe side of a hedge threw a cabbage stump at him. He got down to the beach as quickly as possible.

There leaning against one of the boats stood a fellow with an empty pipe in his mouth, and an empty look in his face. "He must be a little better than the rest, to prefer his own company to theirs," thought Redlands, and ventured to speak, without expecting much civility in return.

"Is there any way back to Loevally without—ah—going up that watercourse?" he asked.

The man looked at the sea, which was as calm as the conventional mill-pond.

"I don't like vent'ring out with this here old boat, master; but I *will* venture it for eighteenpence."

Thinking the man's life at least might be worth more than eighteenpence to his family, Redlands replied that he would prefer going on foot if it were practicable.

"Oh, there's a way up Redrift and the Combe if you only knows which road to go," said the man.



"IS THERE ANY WAY BACK TO LOEVALLY?" (p. 96).

"I'll give you half-a-crown to show me the road."

"Half-a-crown! Come on, sir; it's a precious long time since I've seen half-a-crown;" and with that the man struck out along the shingly beach, Redlands following with a feeling of relief in turning his back on the Gap, albeit the loose pebbles were painful to the pedestrian in fashionable boots.

"What shall I say to that poor little girl?" he wondered as he plodded on. "She will never understand how utterly helpless I am. If she were in my place, now, how much she might do! What a pity she isn't!"

For a good half-mile he ploughed along that wretched shore; now and then stretches of slaty shale made walking a little easier. Presently he observed that the sea was no longer grey, but tinged with dull red as far as the eye could reach. He asked his guide the meaning of this.

"It's the stream as comes down Redrift

as does it, master. It's as red as blood. I guess that's why the rift is called red," the man explained.

Then they came to the rift—a narrow chasm in the red rock, down which poured a stream of water, thick, and of a deep red. He opened his eyes, and looked about him with a searching eye.

"We've got to go up here, master," said the guide.

"All right," replied Redlands, still with his eyes on the rocks about him.

"It's a bit rough, and it's a bit dirty," said the man; "shall I turn up the legs of your trousers?"

"No, never mind; go ahead!"

Redlands was getting excited about these rocks. Up they went, such a path as very few Pall Mall gentlemen have ever experienced, I reckon; the guide looking at the ground in front for safe foothold, Redlands following in his steps instinctively, his eyes continually exploring the rocks on either side. Presently

he stopped where the red rock rose sheer up a hundred feet or so.

“Whose estate are we on?” he asked.
“Does this belong to Miss Sylvester?”

“Lord, no, master! There’d be a nice clean path up here if it did. This is Redlands’, and wus luck for us as has to live on it.”

“Do you think you can knock a bit off that piece of rock sticking out there?”

The man thought he could; and finding a loose stone, chipped off a fragment and brought it to Redlands. The young man took it eagerly, weighed it in his hand, and looked at it closely; then he sat down on a rock as if he were bewildered.

“Will you have my jacket to sit on, master? You’re a-spiling your clothes,” said the fellow.

Redlands shook his head, and sat musing, with the piece of red rock in his hand. After awhile he started to his feet, and followed his

guide till they came to the top of the rift, where the scrubby Combe began. Then he paused to look down the rift, then he started off to climb the hill to the right, despite the guide's assurance that he was going away from Loevally. From this hill he went to the next, following a course that must have seemed erratic enough to the man at his heels, and only stopping from time to time to examine the outcropping rock.

Suddenly he remembered his appointment to meet the girl at the school-house, and looking at his watch, found it was already three.

"Show me the main road to Loevally as quickly as possible," said he.

When they were in the road, Redlands, after looking about to mark the place, gave the man half-a-sovereign, and said, "Meet me here to-morrow morning—early—eight o'clock. Don't forget."

"Right, master; no fear! I'll bring you the change of this here."

“I don’t want any change ; bring a pick and a spade, that’s all ;” and off he started at a brisk pace towards Loevally.

Just then I caught sight of him, for I had driven over to the Court to see Miss Sylvester about the strange telegram from her grandfather, and was then going back to Coneyford. I pulled up as we met, but for a moment could say nothing for sheer amazement, to see this young swell spattered and daubed from head to foot with the purple-red mud.

“ Would it be inconvenient to turn round, Keene, and drive me to Loevally ? ” he asked. “ I have an appointment, and I fear I may be late.”

Your true gentleman has the same nice regard for punctuality, whether his appointment be with a dairy-maid or a duchess.

“ Not a bit, my lord,” I replied, “ especially as my visit to Loevally was partly to see you.”

“ All right,” he cried, setting his foot on

the step and springing up to my side with an alacrity that surprised me not less than his bespattered condition.

“I had to tell you,” said I, “that we cannot let you have a definite answer about the purchase of your estate for at least a week.”

“It’s all the same if you can’t let me know for a year. The estate’s not for sale. Miss Sylvester shall never set her foot on it if I know anything.”

I looked at him in amazement, wondering for a moment whether he was sober.

He laughed boisterously “Keene,” said he, “if I know anything of mineralogy—and that is the one subject, I believe, I do know well—I shall be in a position to buy back the whole of the old estate before I’m ten years older.”

“He must be tipsy or out of his mind,” thought I; and I dare say he read what was in my thoughts, for again he laughed in the same excited manner as before.

“Look at that!” said he, showing me the piece of red rock; “there’s sixty per cent. of iron in it; and there’s nothing under those hills” (turning back in his seat) “but that ore for a hundred and fifty feet down, I’ll answer for it!”

CHAPTER VII.

THE SIBYL.



MISS JIGGER.

REDLANDS' excitement was accounted for. To find, on the eve of selling the last acres of his estate to cover his debts, that the land contained treasure to restore all that had been lost in the past, and insure ample competence, and more, for the future,

was surely enough to turn his head. It turned mine for the moment, so that I could only look at him in incredulous astonishment.

"I must have money to work it, Keene," he pursued. "You can raise it on a mortgage, or something of that kind."

“Yes; there will be no difficulty in raising six or eight thousand on the estate as it is. Of course, when it is proved that there is a vast source of wealth in it, it will be easy to raise ever so much more. On that point you will take a surveyor’s opinion at once, I suppose?”

“No,” said he; “I shall trust to my own guidance in that. I want to feel that I am good for something.”

“H’m—yes,” said I dubitatively; “still—” I was about to add that two heads are better than one: that, though doubtless his theoretical judgment was sound, yet a man of practical experience might prevent him falling into a costly mistake, with other observations of a prudential kind; but he interrupted me.

“I know what you would say: that, of two fools, he who keeps his money is the least foolish—that it is better to know my idea is worthless before spending anything upon it than after. I don’t contest that. But if all the surveyors in the world were

against me, I would not abandon this enterprise whilst I had the means to pursue it."

"I am glad to hear you so confident about it," said I. After all, I thought, he will cool down in a week, and be more likely to listen to reason.

"Besides," he continued, "there's no time to wait for surveyors' reports; I must begin at once. You must let me have a few hundreds to-morrow, if possible."

It was no worse to throw away a few hundreds over this folly than over any other, I said to myself; he had not asked my advice, and it was not in my province to direct him; my business was to serve my client, and so I promised to let him have some money the next day.

"Thanks!" said he; then, after a moment's pause, he added earnestly, "You don't know how I feel about this; it's like waking from a dream of death to find oneself full of life and vigour!"

I was heartily glad to hear him speak in this way, and I said so. Then, my nag falling into a walk, for we were at the foot of the hill leading to the church, he said, "I won't trouble you to take me any further, Mr. Keene. I'll get down here." And with that he shook hands, leapt down, and walked off up the hill quicker than my pony would have gone—which was perhaps why he proposed walking, being in this impetuous, eager mood.

And now, to continue my story and keep the threads of it well in hand, I must again go greatly upon hearsay and my own conclusions, setting down what has been told me by a certain party intimately acquainted with the facts, and making such additions as the circumstances of the case seem to warrant.

Miss Sylvester had left the schoolroom a little before the time—an unusual occurrence with her—and was some little distance down the hill when she met Redlands. There was something hopeful in the quick elasticity of

his step as he approached, but when he was near enough for her to see the expression of his face, in which the apathy and dejection of the morning had given place to strenuous interest and eager exultation, she knew that the wish of her heart was achieved.

“Eureka!” he cried, holding out his hand, for his excitement had not been abated by the long pull up hill.

“Eureka,” said she, giving her hand; “that means, I have found it: does it not?”

“Yes, I have found it, thanks to you, you little Sibyl. Oh, I don’t forget,” he added, turning quickly from gay to grave, “I never shall, that I owe everything to you.”

“I should like to think I have been of some use to you, but I would rather believe that you owe most to the prompting of your own heart.”

“My heart!” he replied in a tone of perplexity; then suddenly bursting into a laugh, he added—

“ Oh, I see what you mean. You think I was touched with remorse by the deplorable condition of the people on my estate, and came to the virtuous resolution to build them a pier, furnish them with fishing-boats, make the approaches decent, and, in short, do for Black Gap what Miss Sylvester has done for Loevally ; that’s what you would have done, or would have had me do.”

“ Yes,” said she ; “ that is what I should have tried to do.”

“ And what you might have succeeded in, having the patience and sweetness of an angel—for I know you have, Sibyl though you are. I have no qualities of that kind. I must do nothing, or take everything at the charge. I couldn’t lay siege to Fortune , I must carry it by impetuous assault.”

They were now walking side by side. Marian glanced uneasily at her companion, and he, catching that glance, again laughed, thinking, perhaps, what a long little face it was.

“My heart counts for nothing in the matter,” said he; “I’m afraid if you had known how material and worldly I am, you would never have sent me to Black Rock Gap.”

Then he confessed how he had quitted the village in disgust, resolved never to go there again, and to get rid of it with the least possible delay, and only changed his intention when he discovered the wealth of iron ore that lay in his estate. Marian was a little down-cast to hear this, knowing so little of mankind, and having but girlish ideals. But she was ready enough to make excuses for his shortcomings, because he was a man, and could not be supposed to have the same feelings and views as a woman. To be sure, her father was a brave soldier, manly in all things, and yet patient and tender withal; but then he was so much older.

So with this under-current of thought she followed the course of her companion’s

conversation, gradually warming with his glowing description of the great find, and coming to share something of his enthusiasm.

“To be sure,” said she, “this will give employment to all those poor things at the Gap.”

“Assuredly, and to as many more as I can get together. And look, my dear little friend, instead of waiting till a pier’s built and boats are furnished for a change in their condition, the whole lot can be got to work at once.”

“Oh, that is good!” she cried. “But do you think they are capable of miners’ work?”

“The first thing is to make an approachable road to the place; and any one can work at that who has a pair of hands. There’s work enough; my only fear is that I shall not be able to get as many workmen as I need. I should like you to see what there is to do.”

“There’s nothing I should like better,” said she simply, taking him literally at his word. “I may yet be of service to you.”

“I owe you too much already to neglect such a chance. I wish you would come.”

“I will,” said she, and readily accepted to meet him where they were then stopping to separate, at eight o’clock the next morning, without the slightest suspicion that she was outraging the conventional proprieties of society as perhaps no other little lady in England would have done in her place. But she was perfectly simple, natural, and free from affectation. It never entered into her innocent head to consider whether she was acting prudently or otherwise; for it was just as natural for her to do what she thought was right as to shun what she believed was wrong.

As for Redlands, this sudden change in his fortunes had completely upset all his established rules of action; and it was not a

bit more absurd, in reviewing the strange events of the day, to find that he had closely allied himself with a pretty little school-teacher than in regarding his legs and feet to remark that he had a cake of red mud on each knee, and that the lustre of his boots was apparently gone for ever.

It was only when he awoke the next morning from a long night's sleep that he asked himself what on earth he could have been thinking about to make an appointment to meet "that little thing" this morning. He felt ashamed of himself—as one does the next morning when there has been indiscretion over-night—and looked forward to still more unpleasant consequences.

"I shall have to drag her about all the live-long day," thought he; "there'll be no getting rid of her: a pretty beginning to serious business, upon my honour!"

Marian, who was not conscious of any past indiscretion, had no such unpleasant

reflections or anticipations. To her great delight, the weather had changed—a smart frost hardened the ground, and the sun, rising beyond the great fir-woods, cast here and there patches of glittering light upon the rimy banks. She was just as calm and self-possessed as ever when Redlands met her, only her face and eyes seemed to reflect the sparkling radiance and freshness of the morning.

“She *is* pretty, and that’s the fact,” thought Redlands, wondering how it was that in her absence he always figured her as an odd little person.

There was nothing odd about her. He noticed that her gloves fitted to a nicety, that her hat was very becoming, her dress altogether in good taste—indeed, it seemed to him that, for a country schoolmistress, she was decidedly fashionable. Nor was there anything unusual in her manner beyond its simplicity and a perfect absence of constraint ;

and, as he had remarked before, a more graceful, delicate bearing and a sweeter voice he had never known.

Under the influence of that sweet little smile of hers all his compunctious forebodings vanished, like the frost from the boughs in the glow of the sun. The prospect of having her on his hands for some time was anything but disagreeable—especially as she had not the dawdling gait of some young women, but stepped out as briskly as he chose to walk.

To be sure, her conversation was so different from most girls'—there was none of that vapid small talk which degenerates into fatiguing banter. Her bright, intelligent eyes were everywhere, noting every aspect of the country about her with the keen perception of one who has taken the pains to learn and love nature. Every observation was a stimulant to fresh ideas. Redlands thought he had never found talking with a woman so easy

and interesting; he felt that he must try and remember one or two phrases of hers—they were so pithy, and yet so pretty. When had that happened to him before? Never.

“Our nearest way to the rift is to strike across the common from this point,” said she, when they came to a bend of the road.

“Then this way we will go,” said he, wondering how she had come by her knowledge.

Presently they came to the edge of the Combe, whence you can look down the rift and see dark purple patches of the ore cropping out amidst the tangled growth of ivy and bramble and fern. He seated himself on a rock, forgetting her for the time, to gloat over this sight; and she, seeing him so absorbed, sat quietly down hard by, thinking what a good thing this was for everybody

“I suppose,” said she, looking about

her, "you will raise the ore to a stage hereabouts, and then cart it by a road up the Combe."

"That would be easier, certainly, than laying a road along the beach, and up that awful Gap."

"And a much shorter way, too." She took from her satchel a folded paper, opened it out and said, "See—here is the rift, and here the Coneyford road; it is much more direct to cut through the Combe than to go round by the steep Gap."

"Why, where on earth did you get this from?" he asked in astonishment, taking the paper.

"I traced it from the Ordnance map. There's nothing surprising in that, is there?" said she, laughing at his bewildered look. "I thought you might want it."

"You certainly are a witch—it's the very thing I needed. With this I can begin at once. Oh! I can't tell you——"

“And I thought this might be useful to you,” she hurried on, to check his thanks, as she produced another paper. “It is the prospectus of a company that supplies a narrow-gauge railway, that is easily laid, and seems very useful where roads are to be made. There’s an agent at Coneyford, you will see.”

He took this in mute wonder. Was there ever a girl so pretty, and yet so practical and thoughtful?

“It’s a long roundabout way by Coneyford; but I suppose in time when you get the pier rebuilt, you will be able to ship the ore straight from here to Wales to be smelted.”

He looked up from the prospectus to her without speaking—“for still the wonder grew, that one small head could carry all *she* knew.”

“You know all about iron, too!” he gasped.



"WHY, WHERE ON EARTH DID YOU GET THIS FROM?" (p. 115)

“Not much more than I read last night,” said she.

“She must have sat up half the night,” thought he—“thinking about my interests while I was sound asleep.” Then he said—

“Have you got anything more in that wonderful bag of yours?”

“Only this,” replied she, giving him a paper. “It’s a list of men, and where they are to be found, who really know something about road-making; for, you see, though anyone will be glad to use pick and spade, only a few know how to trace and level. Those I have marked with a dash. Those with the star are farmers who could lend you horses and carts. This one underlined has a saddle-horse he would lend you, and his son is a sharp little lad, who knows all the men I have written down, and would fetch them, or could take you to them, as you desired.”

“Why, you have saved me a week’s work,” said he.

“I thought I might save you some trouble. That is why I ventured to do what I have, believing that you would not misunderstand me.”

“Misunderstand you!” he cried; “what an ungrateful idiot I should be if I failed to understand that you are the most delicate and generous little lady in the world!”

He looked so happy and eagerly grateful that she could not but feel happy. She rose with a warm flush in her cheek, and held out her hand.

“Oh, you are not going?” he said; “what can I do without you?”

“Work,” she replied, smiling. “I have my own business to attend to, and it is getting late.”

He insisted on walking back with her, but she would suffer him to go no farther than the road, and there they shook hands again, and parted.

He stood where she left him, watching her

quickly retreating figure, and he was glad that she never turned round to look back at him, for he wished to think of her as a lady equal to any of his own class in refinement. Yet he was sorry not to have got another momentary glimpse of that fascinating little face.

CHAPTER VIII.

REDLANDS GOES TOO FAR.

THE work began in real earnest at once, but deeply interested as he was in its progress, Redlands left the men and got up to the school-room as Marian was coming out. He had two or three questions to ask upon technical matters, which she answered as if they had all been considered beforehand. There was nothing very astonishing in this, except to him, for all this business of road-making and the like she had gone through only the previous year, when she made the drive down the Great Park on the east of Loevally. She stopped when they came to where the roads diverged, and he was too well-bred to suggest going farther with her; only when she was gone it seemed to him they had been together no time at all; and the evening before him looked blank in the extreme.

The next morning he went out of his way to pass the point where they had met yesterday, and timed himself to be there at the same moment; she was not there. He lingered five minutes hoping she would come, and when he saw no sign of her, he went his way disappointed. More or less she was in his thoughts all day. The road was empty when he got to the school-house in the afternoon. Had she purposely avoided meeting him? he asked. Then looking at his watch, he found, to his astonishment, that he was a quarter of an hour before the time for her leaving her class. He was delighted at this, and walking up and down, tried to classify all the things he had thought of during the day to say to her. But he was too impatient for that. Something—he knew not what—possessed him, and in that quarter of an hour he looked at his watch half a dozen times. At length she came out, the graceful little lady, and hurrying to meet her, he grasped her hand as though she

were an old, old friend. Then left to himself, he felt that he could have said nothing ; but she had so many questions about the work, that this odd confused feeling wore off at once, and he scarcely left her a chance to say a word for the rest of that too brief space that was allowed them. After that the evening seemed blanker than ever. When he had endured about two hours of solitude he went out, hoping to meet her. He passed every house in the village, glancing into those rooms where he thought it most likely she might live. Some of the houses were decent enough, yet he was not surprised, and in one way not disappointed, not to see her in any of them ; she seemed so much better than the kind of people he saw there. Where could she live ? That he could not discover, even if he had been minded to make inquiries, for he absolutely did not know her name. That was as odd as anything. Then he went back to the dismal inn to write letters, and draw plans, and think about his work, and

stuck at this business till he got sick of it, and throwing his note-book down, felt that he would give anything for a little conversation with some intelligent friend.

One afternoon some days later when they came to the parting spot, he said—

“I don’t know how I’m to say ‘Good evening.’ You can’t tell how I looked forward to meeting you, and we seem scarcely to have said ‘How do you do?’ when it’s time to say ‘Good-bye.’”

Marian made no reply; these meetings and partings had taken effect upon her, possibly.

“It is such a relief to get away from thoughts of levels and gradients, and cartage and money, and all that sort of thing.”

“Oh, yes, you must be glad to set all that aside, and have a good long evening”

He was about to undeceive her on this point when, with a gesture, she silenced him to listen to a robin that had begun to whistle

from a bush quite close at hand. He knew nothing about birds, having lived all his life in cities ; but he listened as if a new sense had been given him, with a delight he had not known before : perhaps because at the same time he was watching a face that looked so sweet and pale in the half-light. What picture could equal it? He could think of none. Only it recalled to his mind something he had read about “her rapt soul sitting in her eyes.” The robin went through his little evensong, pausing now and then, as if to recall another verse, then stopped, and presently a “chink, chink” from the distance told that he was gone.

“That is his ‘Good night’ to us,” said Marian.

“What a beautiful songster!”

“Oh, he is the best of all ; better than the thrushes, for he sings when they are silent—better than the nightingales, for he stops when they go.”

“Is it a blackbird?” asked Redlands.

Marian clapped her hands and laughed.

“Why, no,” said she; “it is a robin; didn’t you know that?”

“Upon my honour, I didn’t. I wish you would walk up to the top of the hill, and tell me about robins and things of that kind. You don’t know what a delight to me it is to detach my thought from the work, and I can’t do that alone. That’s why the evenings are not so pleasant as you suggested.”

“Can’t you fix your mind on other things, if you try?” she asked.

“No; unless I go over what you have said to me in our brief interviews; and then I miss the voice that lends your words a charm.”

Marian was unused to compliments and flattery, and she could make no reply for the pleasure it gave her to hear this. So they got almost to the top of the hill without speaking. Then she caught sight of the moon

rising like a great brass shield beyond the birches, amidst a delicate lacework of slender boughs and sprays.

The still calm beauty of it, the happiness in his heart, was unspeakable to him; he wanted to touch her hand, and that way convey to her simply all he felt and thought, and the desire was the greater because it could not be gratified.

“It is lovely!” he said in a low voice. And then, as they went onward, “I had no idea the country was so beautiful. Even my own barren land with its ragged scrub delights me now; the wind that blows across it seems to bring me vigour and healthier life; and at first I thought I could not endure it for twenty-four hours.”

“I suppose places are like people; we must know them fully to like them.”

“Yes. That reminds me that I did not think very much of you at first, and now” —he paused, for it was on his tongue to say—

“you are never out of my thoughts,” and seeing the danger of that he said instead, “now I don’t know what I should do without you”—which to be sure was scarcely less dangerous than the phrase he suppressed.

Poor Marian felt something in her throat that prevented her speaking in reply, even if she could have found anything suitable to say in the confusion of ideas and thoughts created by his avowal. For it must be remembered that she was totally ignorant of the ordinary ways of society; she had never had a single flirtation, never received any of those attentions that prepare a girl for attacks of this kind, and teach her to take pretty speeches for a mere fashion of speaking. She herself, by her exceptional seclusion, was particularly matter-of-fact, and literal in all things, and looked upon words simply as a vehicle for expressing truthfully actual feelings and ideas.

“I dare say you are right,” he continued,

seeing that he had gone too far. "One must know a place, and all its nooks and corners, to like it as it deserves; still one owes most to human association; there would be more charm in the four walls of a garret with a sympathetic friend than in a boundless paradise alone. This is a steep bit; will my arm help you?"

She laid her little hand, that trembled somewhat, on his arm, and collected her thoughts by an effort.

"Yes; I suppose that is because our happiness lies in making others happy," said she.

When they got back to the point they had started from, Redlands, to protract the parting for another minute, said—

"I wish that robin would begin again."

"We shall hear him no more to-night; it is late for him—and me." Then, with a laugh: "How odd that you should not know the note of a robin!"

“I might have known the song without knowing the songster’s name,” he answered. “I don’t think my bump of inquisitiveness is greatly developed. Some people, when they hear a piece of music that pleases them, immediately ask who composed it. It’s a matter of indifference to me. It’s sufficient that the music pleases me ; what does it matter what the singer’s name is, or where he comes from ? It’s a sort of impertinence to inquire.”

Marian did not quite agree with this ; if she liked a book, she learnt the author’s name, that she might get more of his works. However, she was beginning to like Redlands too well to think he could be in error, and was ready enough to believe that in some respects curiosity was impertinent.

“After all, it’s not so surprising that I did not know the name of that bird, when you think that I have not yet inquired your name, or anything about you. All I know is that you are a school-teacher, and that you make

my very existence delightful to me ; and that's enough for me."

This hurt Marian ; taking the literal view of things—it was enough for him that her company relieved the monotony of a day's work. It was enough for him that she amused him in his idle hours. He wanted no more than that. Such was the conclusion she drew from his careless speech.

Redlands, concluding by her silence and gravity that he had "gone too far," said, to mend matters as he thought, in a lighter tone—

"I don't think I have ever seen a robin in a cage."

"No," she replied, with a voice that had a pathetic vibration. "No. Why should we keep them ? We throw out a few crumbs to attract them, and one comes and sings to us ; and if that one comes no more it doesn't matter ; another will come and sing in its place. Good night."

“Good night,” he answered ; but with an accent of inquiry, as if he wished to know what was the meaning of the sadness in her voice, and the quivering “Good night.”

But she left him hastily without another word or look, and only stopped on her way to the Court to have her little cry out, and dry her eyes, that the maids might not notice what had happened.

CHAPTER IX.

ADVENTURES ARE FOR THE ADVENTUROUS.

ABOUT three or four days after this, according to my calculation, Lord Redlands called in upon me. He came frequently into Coneyford—nearly every day—on matters of business, and I had seen him several times, but never, since the day of his arrival, with such a lugubrious countenance as he presented now. He said “Good morning,” and seated himself in silence. I could see that something had gone wrong, and he did not know how to open his business to me. So I proceeded to pump him.

“Getting on with your road satisfactorily?” said I.

“Oh, yes,” he replied; “the weather is in our favour—that’s all right.”

“Heard from Lloyd and Davies?” These

were the founders at Cardiff to whom he had submitted a sample of the ore. It struck me that the ore had proved worthless, which would account for his being out of spirits.

“Yes. They’ve offered a price for two thousand tons; and the price proves that they find the ore is rich, as I thought.”

“Well, that’s cheering, if the block is up to sample.”

“There’s not the least doubt of that. I’ve had the great head blasted, and it’s all through alike.”

Evidently it was not that had upset him. I tried new ground.

“Like the country any better than you did?” I asked, thinking he might be sick of it, and wanting to get back to Pall Mall.

“Ever so much,” said he; “I shouldn’t like to leave it now. Going to have a Swiss chalet put up, so that I may go into quarters at once.”

“Rather cold for the winter,” I suggested.

“On the contrary, those wooden houses are very warm.”

“You’ll find it rather dull, living there alone, won’t you?” I suggested.

“I don’t mean to live there alone, if I can help it,” he replied with emphasis.

Then there was a pause. It struck me that if he liked the country, intended to live there, and was in a fair way of making his fortune, it would be the best thing in the world for him to make the acquaintance of my nice little client, Miss Sylvester, and in the end marry her. That would be a good thing for her too; so breaking the silence, I said—

“Have you called at Loevally Court yet?”

“No; and I don’t wish to,” said he curtly.

“Do not think me impertinent if I say that I think you ought to do so, as a

matter of politeness; not from a social point of view—you know more about that than I do—but as a point of common business etiquette.”

“What do you mean, Keene?” he asked, somewhat sternly, as if resenting the imputation of want of civility of any kind.

“Why, sir,” said I, “you offered to sell your estate to Miss Sylvester. On that offer we wired to the actual proprietor, old Sylvester, who has come all the way from the south of Italy to give you an answer to that proposal.”

“I did not think of that,” said he. “Has he arrived?”

“He arrived the day before yesterday.”

“In that case I will certainly call and explain matters as soon as possible.”

Saying this, he took out his note-book, and made a memorandum; as he slowly closed the note-book, he said, without raising his eyes—

"Can you tell me the name of the lady who teaches at the Loevally school?"

"Oh, yes," said I; "I know her well. Miss Jigger is her name."

"Jigger," he repeated, in a tone of disappointment. "Can you tell me where she lives?"

"At the little Chandler's shop at the bottom of the village."

"That dirty little den, where there's sweetstuff, and candles, and ginger-beer in the window?"

"That's it. Her mother looks after that and old Jigger too—and he needs a lot of looking after—the worst character in Loevally. Miss Sylvester would have turned him out long ago but for her sympathy with Miss Jigger—who really is a hard-working, decent sort of body."

"She's as good as she looks," said Redlands, with a sigh for her relations.

"Good as she looks!" said I, with a

smile. "Well, that isn't saying much for her good qualities."

"You don't think her pretty?" he asked, in a tone of surprise.

"H'm! I don't profess to be a judge on matters of that kind; but if I might hazard an opinion, I should say she was the most ordinary—not to say frightful—female I ever clapped eyes on."

"Perhaps there are two teachers; the one I mean plays the harmonium in the church."

"There's only one mistress; and I never heard of her having any musical talent. Indeed, from the sound of her voice, I should think the poor old soul——"

He interrupted me. "How old is the lady you are speaking of?"

"Well, she would not be offended if any one set her down for forty; but I should think——"

"My dear Keene!" he cried joyfully,

that's not the schoolmistress, for she can't be more than three or four and twenty; she's as pretty as the morning, and her voice is as sweet as—as a robin's."

"Then it's not poor old Jigger. I know she talked of giving up, because the children made fun of her, but——"

Again he cut me short. "Can you find out this new teacher's name and her address?" he asked.

"Certainly; I shall be going over to Loevally in two or three days' time."

"No, go to-morrow, and let me know at once." And then he added, seeing my look of astonishment, "I mean to make that little lady my wife."

I was thunderstruck, and followed him to the door in silence. As he threw his leg over the horse I reminded him of his promise to call at Loevally Court on old Sylvester, as I scarcely cared to present myself there before something had been done about the

breach of purchase. He promised to go there immediately, and started off at a gallop.

* * * * *

“Half-past three,” said he to himself, looking at his watch as the keeper opened the gates of Loevally Court to let him through. “I shall just have time to knock off this precious interview, and get back to the school by her usual time.”

He passed the gate, and quitting the drive, cantered over the turf in the direction of the Court. Following the sweep of the drive, as he rounded a bank of rhododendrons, he caught sight of a figure before him that set his heart bounding. It was she—the girl he had been thinking of night and day for a fortnight and more, whom he had been seeking in vain the last three mornings and evenings. She was walking briskly along, as was her custom, a book in her hand, her back to him. She did not hear him coming over the

grass until he was close behind her, and then, as she looked up quickly, he was struck with the pallor of her cheek, the care in her face and deep eyes. He sprang from his horse and turned to her with outstretched hand; in that moment the colour had come back to her face, and all the pain gone from her eyes.

“Oh, I am so glad to have found you again!” he cried. “I have been wandering about like a miser looking for lost treasure since we last parted.”

“I have not been able to do my ordinary work in the school. There have been other things to occupy me”—she paused. He had been waiting for that pause.

“You are *not* Miss Jigger, are you?” he asked.

That made her laugh; and shaking her head, she asked—

“Why should you think so?”

“Because old Keene would have it there



"I SHALL JUST HAVE TIME TO KNOCK OFF THIS PRECIOUS INTERVIEW" (p. 145).

was no teacher at the school but Miss Jigger."

"When did he tell you that?" she asked, still smiling.

"This afternoon. I went over there to ask him."

"That wasn't impertinent curiosity, was it?" she asked archly; for her spirits had risen like the silver in a thermometer under the glow of a summer sun since he had been beside her.

"Spare me," he said; and added earnestly, "it was want of thought, not want of heart, that led me into that blunder. I knew, when it was too late to overtake you, why you left me so—why there was that accent of disappointment in your voice. It was that luckless simile that set me wrong. I know the construction you put on what I said. I—I want to tell you all, and undeceive you in the matter."

He looked round. They were close to the

Court, and some one was looking from a window. It was not the place to make an offer of marriage, quite.

“ I want to say a great deal to you ; where are you going ? ”

“ I am going to the house.”

“ So am I. I’ve got to see old Sylvester, and tell him I can’t sell my land—thanks to you. I’ll knock that off in a couple of minutes. Will you meet me when you have settled your affairs there ? ” (“ I suppose,” he thought, “ she has to render up an account to that precious Miss Sylvester. That’s why she has put on a bonnet instead of her little hat ; but it suits her dear little face just as well.”) “ Will you meet me at the school, unless I overtake you on your way ? ”

“ Yes,” she answered ; “ I will go up to the school, unless we meet before.”

“ How kind you are ! ” he said, looking fondly into her face as they took hands.

“ Kind ! ” she murmured.

“ Yes, kind,” he replied, pressing her hand. “ That’s the word ; and if you could only see your face in the glass just now, you’d own it was the right one.”

It required a strong effort to take his hand away, for it seemed to him that hers responded to its clinging.

Then he flung the reins over his horse’s neck, and ran up the steps of the Court, while she passed out of sight by the side walk.

“ Hateful !” he growled, as he knocked viciously at the door. “ To think she should have to go round to the servants’ door simply because she’s a teacher. Never mind, you dear little soul. One of these days, please Heaven, you shall march into the house by this door, and show all the world that you are the equal of Miss Sylvester, or any one else. By-the-bye, I don’t know her name yet !” The servant appeared, and he asked for Mr. Sylvester.

“ Mr. Sylvester won’t see any one in the

afternoon, sir, gen'ly; but if I send up your card p'raps he'll come down."

Redlands reflected. The old man evidently went to sleep in the afternoon. He might think it worth while to get up. That would take time, and all the while *she* would be waiting at the school. An idea struck him.

"Can I see Miss Sylvester?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, sir; Miss Sylvester sees any one who calls. If you'll step this way, I'll take your card."

Redlands followed the servant, and was left in the great reception-room.

"Just the kind of room I should expect to meet that lady in," thought he: "pretentious, dull, and abominable. Couldn't be more appropriate. Dare say she won't be pleased to lose the chance of getting my estate; may cut up rough. Don't mind if she does."

With these reflections he looked out of window, rather enjoying the prospect of

having a spar with Miss Sylvester, till he heard a door open and close ; then he turned about. Looking into the obscurity, after gazing into the light, he could only at first discern a slight figure at the other end of the room, but it struck him at once that if this was Miss Sylvester she was not such an imposing figure in a room as in the chancel stall. He advanced, but the next moment he stopped with an exclamation of astonishment ; the lady before him was the one he had quitted outside a minute or two ago.

“ Can it be you ? ” he exclaimed.

“ Certainly it is,” she answered. “ You asked to see Miss Sylvester.”

“ You—you Miss Sylvester ! ” was all he could gasp—yet with an accent of keen hope.

“ Why should I not be Miss Sylvester ? ” she asked quietly, smiling at his surprise.

“ I thought that showy woman in the chancel was Miss Sylvester ; I had no idea you, who took such a humble place——”

“That shows that it is sometimes worth while to inquire the name of one who sings. Had you asked me at any time, I should have told you that my name was Marian Sylvester.”

“Marian!” he repeated softly, thinking it the sweetest name he had ever uttered—
“Marian!”

“Sylvester,” she added.

“Oh!” he cried, taking her hand, “let me tell you now what I intended to tell you when we met again. I meant to ask you to change that name for mine—even though it was Jigger, and all was as Keene said about that dirty sweetstuff shop and old Jigger. Oh, Marian!” he pursued, his voice trembling with deeper feeling, “I can’t live without you. You have lifted me out of despair, and given me life and hope. But you must not stop there, for without hope my life is worth nothing. You have made me what I am, you may make me a yet better man; but you must

not let me go back to what I was, Marian, dear," drawing her to him. "You have shown me the road to happiness; will you be my fellow traveller to the end?"

She had bent her head, and shut her eyes that her ears might drink in all these sweet words the better; as he gently raised her face she opened her dark eyes, and looking up into his through the dew of love that had fallen upon them, she murmured—

"Yes, dear, to the end."

CHAPTER X

A STRANGE OLD MAN.



MR. LESTRANGE.

As I had promised Redlands, I went over to Loevally the next morning, and straight to the Court. There I found Miss Sylvester in her neat morning dress, decorating her rooms with

fresh flowers from the conservatory. She was in remarkably high spirits, and, setting down the sprays she was arranging, gave me both hands, and held up her cheek to be kissed—for, as I have said, we were real friends, and only stood upon ceremony in our business

relations. I attributed the brightness of her eyes, the glow on her cheek, her general gaiety, to the influence of her grandfather, knowing nothing then of what had happened the preceding evening ; but when, after our greeting, I inquired about the old man, her countenance fell, and I saw that the source of her happiness was not in his society. So dropping in a chair, I opened the question I had come about, as a good way of changing what was clearly an unpleasant subject.

“ My dear young lady,” said I, “ I’ve come to talk to you about that poor young Redlands.”

“ Have you ? ” said she, turning to pick up her flowers, but without much concern in her tone.

“ Yes. His success over this mining business seems to have turned his head ; and I am sorry to say it looks as if he were going to make a fool of himself.”

“ Why, how’s that ? ” she asked cheerfully,

still bending her brightening face over the flowers.

“ Well, it seems he’s smitten with this new teacher you have up at the school. At first I thought it was old Jigger ; but he swears it isn’t she.”

“ Does he really, *really*, REALLY love her ? ” she cried, in a crescendo of emphasis.

“ Oh ! he’s mad—raving mad—about her, as you may imagine when I tell you that he declares he will marry her, and that actually before he knows her name or anything about her.”

“ Are you quite sure he doesn’t know her name ? ” she asked archly, yet not daring to look me in the face, lest I should see the pit-fall she was leading me into.

“ As sure as I sit here. Why, he came over to Coneyford expressly to find out, through me, what her name is. To humour him, I promised to inquire, but in his real interest chiefly I came here to see if you

and I couldn't prevent his making such a mistake."

"But is it a mistake to marry her if he really, *really* loves her?" she asked.

"Assuredly it is, and an awful, irremediable mistake. Why, he's a peer of the realm!"

"I don't see what difference that makes—except that it must increase her love to think he has sunk all consideration of rank for the sake of his love and her."

"You astonish me, my dear," said I, after a gasp—"you who are so practical and clear-sighted in all things. Can't you see how his infatuation must perish, and regret mingle with the last remnants of love, and that love in time become no more than a duty, when, with his growing fortune, rich friends gather about him, and twit him with having made a *mésalliance*—snub his wife, perhaps?—though, as for that, she probably deserves snubbing—most likely she's a wheedling little hussey"

“But suppose his wife was not to be snubbed; suppose she could show descent as good as his, and possessed a fortune enough at least for her own wants and needs?”

“Oh, that would be another matter, of course—~~IF~~!” I laid a very strong and disagreeable stress on that “if”; then I added contemptuously: “Whoever heard of a girl of decent condition and means teaching in a little out-of-the-way village?”

“Did you ever hear,” said she quietly, “that the teacher who took the singing class in that school every afternoon was Miss Sylvester? and have you any reason to doubt that her condition and means are—*decent*?”

“Why, good gracious me!” cried I, springing from my chair, “you don’t mean to tell me he’s in love with you?”

“He tells me so, surprising as it may seem to you,” said she, mischievously; “but after what you’ve said about my wheedling propensities, I cannot expect to astonish you by

adding that I have consented to be his wife."

"A pretty scrape you've led me into, you little puss!" said I, as she burst into laughter; and then I laughed heartily too, and never have I enjoyed a laugh at others' expense more than I now enjoyed laughing at my own.

Then I kissed her, and made a little speech felicitating her and her lover from the bottom of my heart.

"Well," said I, when this was over and she had wiped a tear of happiness from her eyes, "I've made an old fool of myself, to be sure. But I was right in one hit, and that was at your poverty, for, literally speaking, you haven't a farthing you can call your own. However, that shall be arranged at once; and it's a good job your grandfather is here now, that I can tackle him about the settlement that ought to have been made on you long ago."

“I have been thinking of that,” said she seriously, “and I should like you to speak to him upon the subject while you are here. Hark! He is coming downstairs now.”

“Then just you introduce me to him, and get out of the room as quickly as you can,” said I.

I had not yet seen the old man, and though I was prepared, from his seclusion, and the exceptional character of his few and brief letters, to find him unlike the generality of old men, I was completely taken aback by the spectacle presented to my eyes as the door opened. You may understand my surprise if you picture to yourself a little scarecrow of a man, not more than five feet high, muffled in a superb dressing-gown of fur that came up to his ears and down to his heels, leaving nothing of himself visible but one thin hand loaded with rings (the right was in a sling, he having, I was told, injured it on the journey), and a small weazen face, rigid and shining with the

enamels and fards employed to conceal the mark of Time's finger.

The face, though, was chiefly remarkable for a pair of little deep-set black eyes, that reminded me of nothing I had ever seen that was human; their furtive wandering, their painful restlessness, their apprehensive dread, and treacherous shiftiness, their purposeless regard to right and left, their vacancy, their very movement and the blink of his eyelids were emphatically distinctive of the monkey. I might almost say that his eyes alone were all that was visible of his face; for the rest of his features were as completely concealed and disguised by the coating of waxy enamel and other appliances as his body by the dressing-gown that enveloped it.

“Good heavens!” I thought, with disgust; “what can this thing be like at night, when wig, teeth, ay, for aught I know to the contrary, his very eyebrows and moustache are removed, and the coat of paint and pomade

washed from his skin ? ” That was my first thought, but the next impression was that the bare and yellow, parched and puckered skin of extreme old age would be less repulsive than this palpable pretence to youth. Perhaps it was the knowledge of his great age, the consciousness that this old man was getting on for ninety, that made the sham so disgusting to me ; I had never seen anything like it before : that was another reason for my being so unpleasantly shocked. I remember feeling surprised to find how coolly Redlands treated the subject when I expressed my disgust to him. “ I don’t see anything particularly hideous in his make-up,” said he. “ One meets lots of old men in the world who make fools of themselves. I recollect seeing Charles Mathews in his last performance ; he must have been pretty nearly as old as Sylvester, and he looked no more than five-and-twenty in his part ; there was nothing horrible in that. If you could think of the old man as

being no more than the age he tries to appear, I fancy half your antipathy would be lost." I dare say he was right.

A young man looking like a gentleman's body servant, clean-shaved, smart, active, and dressed in a closely-buttoned frock coat, accompanied the old man. This was his secretary, his constant attendant, and general factotum, Mr. Lestrangle; but I had little attention to give to him just then, being absorbed in the contemplation of his master.

Marian advanced to meet him, and offered her hand with a kindly greeting.

"Charming, charming!" piped the old man in a reedy little voice, but seeming not to move a muscle of his face for fear of cracking the enamel; and with this compliment to his grandchild, he raised her hand and bent his head as if he intended to kiss it; but he let it slip from his shaking fingers as though the intention had gone from his feeble mind, as his eye rested on me and conveyed a new idea.

Marian introduced us, and then left the room. There was no need to offer an excuse for going ; the old man had forgotten her.

“I shall be glad to speak to you on a matter of business,” said I. He still kept his beady eyes fixed vacantly on me. Lestrangle, raising his voice, said in his ear—

“ Mr. Keene, solicitor ; business.”

I saw as he led his master to a chair that there was a small aural instrument fixed in the old man’s ear. He sat down slowly, and with the movement of an automaton.

“ You have heard, sir, perhaps,” said I, drawing a chair near and seating myself, “ that Lord Redlands no longer wishes to sell his estate.”

Lestrangle repeated what I said.

“ Don’t shout, fellow,” squeaked the old man ; “ one would think I was deaf. I hear what the lawyer says.”

Then turning to me—

“ I don’t want to buy his estate. I don’t

want to be bothered with anything concerning it. I've told you so in my letters often enough. I've not come this distance to talk about business ; I've come for pleasure. Understand that, please ! ”

“ Very good, sir ; I hope I shall minister to your pleasure in telling you that your grandchild, Miss Marian Sylvester, is about to marry ”

The old man put a finger into his mouth as if to secure the fastening of his teeth, and then, with the same empty look, said—

“ Going to marry Whom ? ”

“ Lord Redlands.”

He glanced first on one side and then on the other, with that simian look of apprehension ; then leaning back, let his head sink until the fur of his gown mingled with the curls of his wig ; by which time his memory had gone astray, and he glanced from me to his secretary, squeaking petulantly—

“ What's it all about ? ”

Lestrangle replied, “ Miss Sylvester, your

granddaughter, going to marry Lord Redlands ;” then, pointing to me, “ Your solicitor, Mr. Keene.”

“ Well ? ” asked the old man, fixing his eyes absently on me.

“ I feel it my duty as a friend of Miss Sylvester, and as Lord Redlands’ adviser, to suggest the advisability of your making a settlement upon her. By the exertions of your son, the late Colonel Sylvester, and his daughter, Miss Marian, this estate has been made what it is, and I feel sure that you, consistently with the generosity you have displayed in making her your sole legatee, and the strict equity that has characterised your life, will not hesitate to assign this estate to her for her sole use and profit, as a due return for a most faithful stewardship.”

“ You have not lost the will I made ? ” he squeaked.

“ No, I hold that safely ”

“ Well, isn’t that enough for her ? ”

“No, sir, it is not. If that will from any unseen accident should be rendered void, she would be penniless.”

“What could render it void?”

“Many things; for instance, supposing a claim were put in by some one who in years gone by——”

“Years gone by!” he cried in terror. Then suddenly raising himself with his one hand, he craned his neck round to stare behind him, first on this side then on the other, with terrible quickness.

Lestrangle had his hand on the old man’s shoulder in a moment.

“It’s all right, sir, it’s all right!” said he soothingly “There’s no one there.”

Then turning to me, he added quickly in an undertone—

“Leave us for to-day, sir, please. When he’s taken like this there’s no doing anything with him. I’ll make the matter clear to him. He’ll agree to it, and I’ll get him to sign

whatever you think right. Good morning, sir."

I whipped up my hat, and left the room, nothing loth ; as I glanced back from the door, I saw him again sitting back in the chair panting, his mouth open, and Lestrangle coolly dabbing his face with a wash-leather stump to restore the enamel where it had been cracked by the unusual emotion.

Was old Sylvester mad? I asked myself.

CHAPTER XI.

I LEARN AN UNPLEASANT SECRET.

ABOUT three o'clock the next afternoon Lestrangle called on me. He had come over from Loevally in a fly, expressly to see me, he said, about the business I had opened the day before with old Sylvester. I bade him take a chair, and, drawing mine opposite to him, took this opportunity of examining him more closely than circumstances had hitherto permitted.

As I have said before, he looked like a gentleman's servant, clean-shaved and neatly dressed; but now I came to regard him critically I did not like the look of his face. There was avarice in his long hooked nose and thin lips, and an unpleasant hint of cunning in his narrow eyes. Whilst making these observations I asked after the health of his master.

“ Oh, he’s all right to-day, sir,” said he. “ I’ve made him keep his bed, and locked him in.”

“ Locked him in ! ” said I. “ Surely there’s no need of restraint ? ”

“ Oh, isn’t there, though ! ” said he airily, with a knowing jerk of his head. “ I have to turn the key on him if I go away for half an hour ; however, he knows what’s good for him as well as I do, or he wouldn’t keep me on.”

“ Is he subject to some sort of mental hallucination ? ”

“ He’s not mad, if that’s what you mean ; only his nerve is giving way, and he is at times overcome with terror, as you saw him yesterday. At his age something is bound to give way, and it’s his nerve that’s giving—and he knows it. That’s partly the reason of his coming to England. The old buck has led a deuce of a fast life ; that, and the relaxing climate of Italy is telling on him, and he hoped to be braced up by the change. It’s

not a bit of good. Once a horse get's weak-kneed he's never safe."

"Dear me!" said I, "this is distressing. What is the object of the old gentleman's terror?"

"Now, sir, you ask me a question that I must decline to answer—unless I find it worth my while."

I saw clearly enough that he wished me to make it "worth his while"; but I pretended indifference, knowing already the kind of man I had to deal with.

"I have no wish to inquire into your secrets," said I, "and so we will go at once, if you please, to the purpose of your visit."

"Certainly, sir. I explained your proposal to Mr. Sylvester last night, and he authorised me to come here and make an arrangement with you. If we come to terms you can draw up a deed of settlement, and I will get it signed by the old gentleman without further delay"

"I don't know what terms you mean,"

said I. "I proposed simply that Mr. Sylvester should assign to his granddaughter the whole of that estate which is now nominally hers, and will actually be hers at Mr. Sylvester's death in accordance with the will he has made in her favour."

"The whole of the estate. That," said he, shaking his head slowly, "won't do. No, that will not do at all. May I ask, sir, what the value of the estate is?"

"I should value it roughly at two hundred thousand pounds; if it were put in the market it would probably realise no more than half that sum."

He took time for reflection, and then said—

"Well, sir, we will say that you shall put it in the market, and we will divide whatever it realises equally. That will be fifty thousand pounds for Miss Sylvester, and a very good lump sum too. You cannot say we are ungenerous."

I was astounded by this proposition, and not less by the attitude of the man.

“Why should the estate be put in the market at all?” I asked.

“To settle the matter quickly. If Miss Sylvester marries she won’t wish to stay in that dead-and-alive house. And the sooner I get the old man out of it the better for him—and me too. I’d never have let him come if I had foreseen the danger; he’s ten times worse here than he was in Italy. It’s no joke, I can tell you, to be constantly on the watch night and day with an uncertain customer like him, who in one unguarded moment might——” he finished the sentence with a vaguely significant turn of his hands.

“Do you mean that he is in danger of—of destroying himself?” I asked.

“Something like it, at any rate. However, that is neither here nor there. The question is, will you accept on behalf of Miss Sylvester the terms I propose?”

“ I can tell her what Mr. Sylvester offers,” said I.

“ Do, and,” said he, dropping his voice and bending towards me, his elbow on his knee and his forefinger raised warningly, “ if you have a friendly regard for her interests and peace of mind, advise her to say ‘ Snap ’ to that offer ; get the business concluded and old Sylvester out of the way as quickly and quietly as possible. I’ll back you, for my own sake, and the moment we touch the money I’ll whisk the old man off in a Pullman and get him back to Amalfi sharp.”

“ Upon my word, Mr. Lestrangle, I do not understand you,” said I.

“ Is it necessary that you should understand more ? ”

“ Undoubtedly As the matter stands, I should never advise Miss Sylvester to accept fifty thousand now, when by waiting a few years she will inherit an estate worth four times as much.”

He laughed. "Well, Mr. Keene," said he, drawing himself up with an air of contempt, "for a lawyer, you seem to attach a singular amount of importance to that will. Why, man, it isn't worth the paper it's written on. It was revoked months ago. If old Sylvester were to die now his granddaughter wouldn't have a penny to bless herself with."

I was not altogether surprised to hear this, though I pretended to be sceptical.

"Perchance you can tell me," said I "whom he has left the property to."

"Yes, I can," he answered. "He has left every farthing he has to me. And if I were as sure that he would go off the hooks in twenty-four hours or even twenty-four weeks, I shouldn't be here now. But I'm not sure. The old fellow may linger on three or four years, and I can't afford to wait; it's too risky. That's why I make this offer of fifty thousand down if you can dispose of the estate in a week."

“ Will you tell me,” said I, “ why you are so careful to prevent Mr. Sylvester destroying himself if his death would be so greatly to your advantage ? ”

“ That’s a riddle I don’t choose to explain ; I can only give you this clue—there are more ways than one in which a man may destroy himself.”

I was fairly perplexed by this enigma—annoyed also ; his tone and bearing added to my irritation ; but a lawyer has to put up with a deal of insolence, and put his pride in his pocket more often than he wishes when his client’s good is to be considered. However, I thought I had let him go far enough, so I rose.

“ You must know, Mr. Lestrangle,” said I, “ that an honest man can have no dealings that are not perfectly straightforward and above suspicion. I must refuse to have any further negotiations on this matter except with Mr. Sylvester himself.”

“In that case we shall have no further negotiation at all,” said he, in a tone of irritation. “I shall take him away to-morrow, and you’ll hear no more of him till he’s dead and buried.”

He tapped his knee with his fingers in silent thought for a minute or so, and then, as if to make one last attempt, he said, thrusting his hands in his pockets—

“Come, Mr. Keene, you profess to be the friend of Miss Sylvester, and for a whim you deprive her of fifty thousand pounds. As I live she won’t get a shilling, everything will be taken from her unless you accept my terms. Think what you are doing.”

I did think, and I own my reflections made me silent and dubious.

“I have candidly told you why I wish to make this arrangement; I don’t want to wait with this perpetual watching night and day for an indefinite time. I am not greedy. Fifty thousand pounds is as much as ever I wish to

have. I would rather have that now than twice as much later on."

"Can you tell me what claim you have to a share in this estate?" I asked. He was silent. "I must have an explanation of that kind," I continued, "not only to justify such an arrangement to the satisfaction of my own conscience, but to the satisfaction of my client also."

"If you consider the satisfaction of your client you will ask for no such explanation. Believe me," he said, speaking earnestly, "I am dealing honestly, and kindly too, in this; an explanation may ruin Miss Sylvester's peace of mind for ever. Come, sir, I know what you are thinking about—that a man cannot make a deed of gift without giving some reason for his donation. Well, I will give you a plausible and absolutely true reason for old Sylvester's generosity to me—if you choose to call it 'generosity'—I have saved his life and his honour; he has stated the fact in the will

made in my favour. Now let that suffice, and, as you respect Miss Sylvester, push me no further."

I hesitated still, feeling that I should be compounding with a rascal, as I felt sure he was.

"I tell you frankly," he continued, "that if you do drive me up in a corner I shall tell you all, and then you and Miss Sylvester will be only too glad to stop my mouth with fifty thousand pounds and more besides to get old Sylvester back into Italy"

Well, thought I, honesty is the best policy all the world over. I never knew any good got by a lie, nor any good lost by a truth, and I'll stick to my principle at all hazards.

"Mr. Lestrangle," said I, "my mind is made up; there must be no reservation. I must have the whole truth respecting this affair or wash my hands of it entirely"

He looked at me searchingly. "You mean what you say?" said he.

“Emphatically I have named my condition, and will abide by it.”

“Very well,” said he. “You will heartily wish you had not, but that is not my affair. I have done the best in my power to avoid explanation, in kindness to Miss Sylvester, whom I admire and sympathise with heartily, though not to the sacrifice of my own fortune. Now then, ask what you will, and I will answer without reserve or hesitation.”

Being in this manner brought face to face with the crisis of my own seeking, I felt anything but comfortable — the man’s evident sincerity at this point shaking my faith in the wisdom of the course I pursued. However, there was no way out of it now.

“First of all,” said I, getting my thoughts into some sort of categorical order, “what is the old man afraid of?”

“Of himself, chiefly. In a reasonable state of mind he is aware that his nerve, as I call it, is giving way; that there are times

when he is not master of his own actions, and that in those times he is likely to pour out all that lies on his conscience to the first person he meets—or to the empty air. He was seized with one of these attacks, which he calls remorse, and I term loss of nerve, yesterday, and you saw how I had to stop him. He is liable to them at any moment upon the slightest provocation. You produced the attack by a casual suggestion of something in the past. But the most dangerous times are at night, when he sinks into a state of somnambulism, and would rush out of the room if I did not keep the door fastened and the key under my pillow. His cries would alarm the whole neighbourhood if I were not sharp to wake him up, get him into bed, and quiet him. I never sleep out of his room. You can understand, therefore, why I wish to be quit of such a service.”

“ You spoke enigmatically of his destroying himself,” I said.

“It’s clear enough. He would destroy himself, if I let him, by betraying a secret that would bring him to the gallows.”

“Impossible !” I gasped.

“True enough. If he escaped hanging, it would be by a successful pleading of insanity. But that could hardly be maintained in the face of the facts, and would certainly never clear him in the estimation of any reasoning man.”

“But what crime has he committed?—when?—where?”

“When?—fifty years ago. Where?—in that very house where he is now lying. What crime?—the murder of his friend, Lord Redlands !”

I sank back in my chair, speechless.

“I have heard the details of that crime over and over again from his lips,” Lestrangle continued. “He was a widower. Friend of Lord Redlands. Fell in love with Redlands’ wife. Redlands, in difficulties, borrowed

money of him and gave him the receipt. In the night he stifled his friend with a pillow, and stole the money he had brought down. Made it appear that highwaymen had done it. To show his own honesty, he tore up the receipt he had received from Redlands. Redlands' widow, still in difficulties, sells the Court and half the estate. Sylvester buys it, and then offers the title-deeds to the widow if she will marry him. She refuses—suspecting him, probably. He, to avoid inquiry and forget his disappointment, goes abroad. From the very first he seems to have been pursued by remorse, for he lived in utter seclusion, and had not the courage to look on his own son. But his secret was his own until a couple of years back, when he perceived that he might at any moment betray himself under the pressure of remorse. Then he engaged me to watch him night and day, promising any reward I liked to demand. I demanded all he had; and he agreed, making the will I have told

you about. For two years this has gone on ; I have stuck to his side like a shadow, and if ever man deserved reward, I do. Night and day, day and night, I have to watch him. I'm getting tired of it. I cannot answer for my own reason under a prolonged stress of this awful kind. For it *is* awful. Besides that, I have to occupy his mind ; I have found the greatest success in pampering his vanity. In Italy he is regarded as a millionaire, and the baser kind of aristocracy receive and flatter him. He thinks he is witty and pleasing ; you see his fatuity. Well, as I say, I can stand it no longer, and either I must leave him to go his own way to the fate that has been standing before him fifty years, or—I must have fifty thousand pounds to get him back to Italy and keep myself a bit comfortable. Now, Mr. Keene, it is for you to decide which course I am to take.”

CHAPTER XII.

A FINE FELLOW

I CANDIDLY confess I was completely staggered by the revelation of this man. I did not know what to do—that's the fact ; and, as he had prognosticated, I heartily wished that I had not compelled him to make the disclosure. Instead of being guided by the axiom that "honesty is the best policy," I might have trusted to another, "where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise," with considerable advantage. Whilst these reflections were passing through my mind I sat silent enough.

"Well, Mr. Lestrangle," said I, at length, "you cannot expect me to do anything in this matter without mature consideration."

"I can't give you long," he replied. "Delay is dangerous, especially in a case of this kind. The associations make that house unfit

for the old man to stop in. If any accident should happen to me it would be all up with him, and me, too, so far as my fortune is concerned. The servants are inquisitive; one never knows what may take place. Supposing this affair should be blown, and the old man were convicted, the Redlands family might contest his claim to an estate that he got through a fraud, as you may say. No"—shaking his head—"I can't give you long—a couple of days or so, not more. I shan't be easy until I get him out of the country. If you cannot decide sharp, I must try some other means."

"You shall have my answer the day after to-morrow," said I; "in the meantime you will, of course, say nothing to anybody of what has passed between us?"

"I'm not a fool," said he, with a knowing look, "and I don't think you can accuse me of being a rogue, either. I have acted straightforward with you, and as fairly as any man,

with a due regard to his own interest, might. Good day."

For a long while after his departure I sat turning the thing over in my mind, looking at it on this side and that with the hope of seeing my way out of the difficulty, yet for the life of me I knew not what to do. One thing I certainly could not do: I could not tell poor little Marian that her grandfather was—the worst of criminals (I could not even bring myself to call him by the name with which the world would brand him if all were known). I felt sure it would go near to break her heart, and I was morally certain that with this stain on her family she would never consent to be the wife of young Redlands. This certitude put me on a new train of thought, and I asked myself if I ought, in common honesty, to let Redlands marry her in ignorance of this family disgrace?

The answer to that was so clearly "No!" that I sent round at once for my gig,

clapped on my hat, and drove off to find Redlands, and let him know the state of affairs.

I knew where to find my lord, and instead of going down the breakneck path to the Gap, I went on to the point where the new cut turned off to Redrift. The road was traced out, the wild growth of furze and bramble had been cleared away, making it already practicable for my gig, and dozens of men were hard at it with pick and shovel, making a cutting through a rise in the Combe. It did one good to see these signs of activity on this land which no foot but the poacher's had traversed for years and years, and to observe the cheerful good-will with which each of these men, who had so long stood in despondent idleness for want of work, now lent himself to labour. I was known to them as Lord Redlands' lawyer, and, as I passed along, the cheery "Good a'ternoon, Mr. Keene," with a touch of the cap, was a testimony to their respect and gratitude towards their new master.

“I suppose I shall find the governor at the head of the rift?” said I.

“Ay, sir, he’s bound to be theere som’eres,” was the reply

A wooden shanty had been knocked up at the lower end of the Combe, and here I found Redlands seated at a deal table, on which were writing materials and a pile of letters under a paper-weight. A shelf of books hung against the wall, and all sorts of plans, sections, and that kind of thing, were roughly nailed on the deal planks for reference. The only ornament in the place was a finely-carved oak frame that he must have bought at Coneyford, in which was set a pen-and-ink tracing from the Ordnance map—that, as I learnt afterwards, which Marian had given him.

I had opportunity to make these observations, for Redlands, who rose on my coming, was now concluding an interview with a man who seemed loth to go away. I knew the man by sight. His name was

Coneybeare, a speculator, and one of the wealthiest men in Coneyford. He had for years been hankering after the Loevally estate, intending, it was rumoured, if he could only get it, to run a rail there from Coneyford, build a big hotel, make it a fashionable watering-place, and realise cent. per cent. on the investment.

“Well, my lord,” said he, going slowly towards the door, “you’ll think it over, won’t you?”

“I have thought it over,” said Redlands, with good humour, “and I have resolved to work the thing myself. If I knew the exact value of the property, and you were to offer me double that sum, I would not sell.”

“I can understand that, my lord,” said Coneybeare. “I dare say there is no one who has a keener sense of enjoyment in working a thing to advantage than I have. To see one’s hopes realised, to see one’s exertions richly rewarded, is the greatest happiness in the world, to my mind. And this delight takes a

wonderful hold on a young beginner, I know But it's only an old soldier like me who can stand reverses; the young 'uns can't. You'll get reverses: you're bound to in the natural course of things, be your luck as good as it may, and I don't think you will keep up your spirits to the present level when things go wrong, in conjunction with a spell of bad weather and, say, a sluggish liver. Then you'll say to yourself, 'Why should I be hanging about here in the slush and mud, making so much a day, when old Coneybeare would give me twice the amount to go away and enjoy myself in the society I've been used to?' I don't say you won't be well paid, my lord, for all your work here. You're bound to make money; but I can make more. I've got the working plant ready to set down, whereas you have to buy yours, and set up everything new I shan't take 'No' for an answer to-day. I believe sooner or later you will ask me to buy; all I shall trouble you

with for the present is to remember my address—Coneybeare, Coneyford—it's easy to remember, and I hope soon to hear from you." With that he shook hands, nodded to me, and went off. Redlands came back to me, his face beaming with happiness.

"It's something, Keene," said he, "to be able to refuse thousands after screwing for hundreds."

"Yes," said I. "That Coneybeare, I'm told, won't touch a speculation under five or six figures. I am not surprised at your high spirits."

"Ah, you will be less surprised when you know all!" cried he; and then, with a laugh, "By George! I forgot that you promised to come and see me to-day. Well, what have you found out about the teacher at the school? Have you found out her name?"

"Yes, I know her name, and so do you, now. I know all about it."

He was so light-hearted and joyful that I felt sick to think of the part I was about to play, and the bitter disappointment that must soon overcloud all his hopes. Seeing me so leaden and down in the mouth, he concluded that I was displeased with the errand he had sent me on the day before, for he laughed outright at me.

“You’re sure her name is not Jigger, eh?” he asked. “You’re certain it’s no compliment to her better qualities to say she’s as good as she looks! After all, you have more right to laugh at me than I at you. But you’re not surprised now that I fell in love with her before I knew her name even.”

“No, sir,” said I; “I am not surprised at that. There’s not a lady in the world more deserving of a good and honest gentleman’s love.”

He grasped my hand in eloquent silence; I couldn’t look up in his face, but sat there jogging the paper-weight to and fro idly with

my left hand, as miserable at heart as if the young fellow were my own brother.

After a brief pause, in which he must have been studying my face, he said, with sudden conviction, "Keene, you have come here to bring me bad news."

"Yes, sir," said I, "it is bad news that has brought me here."

"Nothing has happened to *her*!" he said, with quickened breath.

"No, thank God. She knows nothing about it, and she mustn't. I shouldn't let you or any one else know but for her sake."

"Out with it, Keene; I am a man," said he, with fierceness in his voice.

"Well, a quick step is best on miry ground, so you shall have the truth in a couple of words—Old Sylvester is a scoundrel, a thief—and worse!"

"A thief!" he exclaimed, incredulously.

"*And worse*," I repeated.

He seated himself without a word, and I

then told him the whole wretched story from beginning to end. When he had heard all—I was careful to omit nothing, and, indeed, said considerably more than I have written in narrating my interview with Lestrangle—he said with decision—

“Miss Sylvester must never hear a word of this ghastly business. We must get that awful old sinner out of the way at once. Can you set about this immediately?”

“Yes; but lawyer as I am, I have not the slightest notion what is to be done.”

“*I* know what is to be done,” said he decisively, and without a moment’s reflection. “Will you follow my directions?”

“With all my heart, and at once,” said I, rising from my chair.

“You must find Lestrangle.”

“He is at the Court, without doubt.”

“See him, and exact his promise to leave the country to-morrow, and take that horrible old rascal with him.”

“He won’t go without money, and he’ll not be satisfied without a lump sum.”

“He shall have as much as he demands.”

I scratched my chin.

“Money can be raised, certainly,” said I, “though it will be sharp work to get any in twenty-four hours; and how I’m to get the mortgage afterwards without awaking Miss Sylvester’s suspicions, I don’t know ”

He had been hastily writing while he spoke, and now blotting the sheet and folding it, he said cheerfully—

“This will do it!” He stuck the folded sheet in an envelope, and as he addressed it, said, still in the same brisk tone—

“When you have settled that blackguard Lestrangle, take this over to Coneyford, and deliver it yourself—won’t you, Keene? I feel that I am not asking a favour,” he added, with a softened tone, as he rose and put the letter in my hands, “because it is for *her* sake.”



"'BELIEVED IT YOURSELF' WON'T YOU, KEENE?" (p. 198).

I glanced at the envelope and read the address—"Mr. Coneybeare, Coneyford." I knew what that meant. Redlands had accepted the contractor's offer. With one stroke of the pen he had given up his fortune to save Marian from the shame of knowing her grandfather's crime. The heroism of our age lies in the exercise of moral courage, which surely surpasses mere physical hardihood as much as our reason excels the instinct of brutes; and I say that in this generous act my young Lord Redlands showed more fortitude than any of his ancestors who fell in battle. For certainly—though I have never fought any one save in a court of law—it is ten times easier for a man to risk his life in the heat and passion of battle, than in cool blood to relinquish with good and cheerful heart the fortune he has won, and can scarcely hope to recover.

With these thoughts in my mind I grasped the young man's hand.

“You are a fine fellow,” said I, “and worthy of the name you bear. I know what is in this letter——”

“Then off you go,” said he cheerily. “You are wasting time, Keene, and there’s none to spare; I’ll change these muddy things for others, and go over to the Court presently, so that Miss Sylvester may have no suspicion. Meanwhile, you see Lestrangle and Coneybeare, and arrange matters, so that we get the old man out of the country by to-morrow night.”

“It shall be done,” said I, and jumping in my gig—for he had taken me by the arm and got me out of the shed while he was talking—I drove off as fast as my nag would go.

Now, as I could not have gone up to the house without being seen by Marian, and exciting her curiosity, I pulled up when I came near the park gates, and sent a boy, who chanced to be there, with a note written on a leaf of my note-book, addressed to Lestrangle, and telling him to see me at once.

After waiting some time, I got his answer by the boy, saying he would come immediately.

While I waited I settled in my mind how I would manage my man, little doubting that I could induce him to accept something on account, and go with an agreement that the rest of the money he demanded should be sent on to him; by which arrangement we might avoid parting with the Redlands estate to Coneybeare, and so keep it in our own hands. If we only had time, we could get all the money that was needed on a mortgage, without cramping Redlands greatly for present funds.

I was getting this neatly arranged in my thoughts when Lestrangle came to me with an expression of anger and bitter disappointment in his face.

“I have been thinking your offer over,” said I, as he came up. “It’s all right; I——”

“No, it isn’t all right,” he said moodily, interrupting me. “It’s all wrong.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“It’s all over,” said he, throwing up his hands. “The cat’s out of the bag.”

“What?”

“Just what I feared,” he explained. “While I was away the old man got loose somehow, and Miss Sylvester knows everything.”

CHAPTER XIII.

FAREWELL.



MR. CONYBEARE.

MARIAN knew all. Now, what was to be done?—Le-strange looked hopeless.

“Where is the old man?” I asked.

“Oh, he’s asleep.

You can understand

the effect of these attacks upon a man of his age; this has been worse than usual—because I was not there to check it. He seems to have run on until he stopped from sheer physical exhaustion. Enough to kill him.” He said these latter words in an injured tone, as if he felt it very hard on himself that the attack had not killed the old man.

“From the look of the servants,” he went on, “I should say that they all knew. If the *worst* should happen, Mr. Keene, what would become of the old man’s property?”

“It would go to the Crown — every penny,” I replied without hesitation, though I was not very certain on this point. “But the worst must not happen. You must get the old man away before the servants can spread the report. You must take him out of the country to-morrow—your own interests are concerned, remember.”

He nodded. I did not care twopence for his interests: my sole purpose was to avoid the terrible consequences of publicity upon poor Marian.

“It’s not such an easy job,” said Lestrangle, drawing his finger and thumb down his long nose reflectively. “He is as obstinate and hard to move as a mule in some things, and this last affair looks as if he were absolutely resolved on putting an end to the torment of

remorse by an open confession. While he feared the consequences of such a confession I had a hold on him, but if he defies them I am powerless. I dare not use force—or I would—for, you see, he might at any moment throw the will he has made in my favour into the fire, and then where should I be?”

“Could you get him away *anyhow* to-morrow if I make it worth your while?”

“How are you going to make it worth my while? That’s the question.”

“You demanded fifty thousand pounds; if it is necessary you shall have it.”

“By to-morrow?”

“By to-morrow” It was no time to make bargains; anything must be sacrificed rather than old Sylvester should be put to trial for that crime.

“You said it would take you a week at least to realise on the estate. I don’t doubt your honesty, of course. But you are a lawyer, and may think I deserve no better

than a little sharp practice. I can't jeopardise my fortune by setting myself against the old man's will without assurance that the money will be paid up."

I told him that Redlands was prepared to sell his estate to save Miss Sylvester from shame.

"Oh, I can't believe that," said he, with a knowing leer.

Then I showed him the letter addressed to Coneybeare, and explained who he was, and all about him. That was a false move. I ought not to have done it; but I thought only of getting the old man away, and shielding my dear little friend Marian.

"Well," said he, giving me back the letter which he had been turning over and regarding while I spoke. "I'll go in and see what I can do. I should like to get over it in the way you suggest, but I see the difficulties I have to steer through. I must make Miss Sylvester believe the old man is out of his mind on

this subject—and for that reason you must keep clear of the place, that she may not suspect collusion. Then I'll try and work the old man. But I warn you, Mr. Keene, that I'm doubtful of success ; and so you had better not deliver that letter until you hear from me. I'll run over to-night, and let you know how it is to be decided. It's no use Redlands selling his estate for less than it's worth, if I can't accept the money when it is realised. You see, I'm perfectly straightforward, and deal honestly with you."

As he said this he held up his head and nodded a "good-bye," looking up into my face almost for the first time. It is difficult to assume an expression on suddenly lifting the head at an unusual angle, I think ; at any rate, the look I saw in his eyes misgave me, for it belied his assertion of straightforward and honest dealing.

I turned round, and walked my nag slowly down the hill ; at the foot I met Redlands,

no longer in his stained working clothes, but neat, spick and span, from top to toe. I pulled up, and told him all that had taken place.

“Poor girl! poor girl!” he said, with a tender inflection of voice; then quietly and more hopefully, “I will go up and see if I can do any good. I said I would be there at five, and it is now,” looking at his watch, “a quarter to, so that she will suspect nothing by my visit. You would do well, Keene, to prepare Coneybeare, though you do not give him that letter till you have heard from Lestrangle, that he may have the money ready if it is likely to be needed.”

I promised him this, and we separated. Arrived at Coneyford, I went straight to Coneybeare’s office, and found him there, alone—his clerks having struck work before their master. I told him my client, Lord Redlands, might be prepared to make terms with him the very next morning, if he could

depend on receiving fifty thousand pounds down on the spot.

He thought a moment, and then said—

“By twelve o’clock to-morrow morning I shall be prepared to put down on this desk a cheque or notes for that amount.”

I told him notes would be preferable, and then went home, feeling I could do no more for the present.

Meanwhile Redlands had gone on to the Court. Miss Sylvester was in her room; he was shown into the little living-room. Presently Marian came down as white as a ghost. Redlands could see that as plainly as he could feel the icy coldness of her little hand as he took it—albeit, foreseeing how she would dread the light falling on her face, he had thoughtfully lowered the shade over the lamp and turned down the wick. Still holding her cold little hand, he led her to a seat before the fire, saying how chill the evenings were now, and then he stirred the fire, and began to rattle

on about his works, as if he was so engrossed in his own efforts that he did not perceive her unusual silence, though it struck him with pity and fear. Poor Marian heard his pleasant voice without distinguishing his words, as one may hear music whilst the attention is fixed upon a book. She was wondering how she could get through what lay before her. Other women would have excused themselves on some pretext, but she was not one to shirk a duty because it was unpleasant. For her there was but one way of doing a thing, and that was the straightforward way

“George,” she said, when he paused, laying down the poker, “I am going away ”

“Going away, love?” he said, his voice dropping to a lower pitch, and faltering more than hers—“going away?”

“Yes—I—I have packed up my little belongings, and I am going away to-night.”

“Then I will go with you, dear,” he said, “wherever you go.”

“No, George, you must stay here. Our paths no longer run side by side. A great misfortune has happened to me. Loevally is no longer mine; I have nothing in the world.”

“Why, that’s as much as I thought you possessed when I fell in love with you, darling,” said he, taking her hand gently “It was but a little schoolmistress I sought to make my wife, and you are still that—and all the world to me.”

He spoke with such infinite tenderness that her heart rose above all its grief in joy to have the love of such a gentle man. Rising as he spoke, he half rested himself on the arm of her chair, and putting his hand round her waist, drew her towards his bent head. She looked up with a little murmur of passionate delight, and yielded her cheeks to his lips—feeling only, thinking not at all. But in a moment her clear reason asserted itself, and she knew she was wrong to yield to her heart

—that she must break the gentle bond between herself and him, and separate for ever. She drew herself away.

“Sit there,” she said softly, pointing to his chair.

He obeyed.

“That is our farewell, George,” she said. “When I said I was going away, I meant from you. I was not thinking of Loevally; that is a loss that I cannot feel yet awhile.”

Could she more plainly tell him how she loved him—how he had absorbed her whole heart?

“And when I tell you that,” she continued, feeling the admission she had made of her great love for him, “you will understand that in bidding you farewell my motive is not a caprice, not trivial, not of a nature that may be overcome by argument, by persuasion, or any influence whatever that could be brought to bear upon it. Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” said he, “I know you too well

to think you would break my heart for nothing."

"Oh, George!" she cried, "don't tell me it will break your heart; or how shall I, a girl, keep mine whole to meet my trouble bravely?"

He got up and walked across the room, that she might not see how he was unmanned—biting his quivering lip and gulping down the sob that rose in his throat, as he thought of losing for ever this dear girl, whose beauty, and sweetness, and goodness had never yet seemed so divinely perfect.

And she, keeping her moist and quivering hands close-clenched in her lap, bowed her head, while the tears dropped one by one upon her knees.

He thought of her in the midst of his own selfish passion—he gauged her woe by that in his own breast—he must put an end to her terrible ordeal, and tear himself quickly away to give repose to that poor stricken heart.

He went up to the side of her chair and laid his hand gently on her head, thinking that his fingers were never again to feel that soft, cool, waving hair.

“I will not ask you to tell me why we must part, love; you have said we must. It is now for me to say, ‘I am going away; farewell.’”

He took his hand from the dear head, and yet paused an instant, hoping to catch one last sound of that voice which was the heavenliest music to his ear; but she could not speak. “Farewell,” died upon her lips. But oh! her generous soul rose in reproach against letting him go away thus, without a farewell, though reason might have whispered, “It is best so.” She was wise and good, obedient to the teaching of her conscience, but with all that she was intensely human. So with the swift impulse of love she sprang to her feet, dashing the tears from her cheeks with the palms of her hands, and with an inarticulate

cry of mingled love, and joy, and sorrow, she threw herself in his arms, and swallowing her grief, she murmured in a sentence broken with the kisses she pressed upon his lips—

“Good-bye—dear, dear love—I cannot ask you to forget me. I cannot wish that you should; but all through life, dear, I’ll pray for your happiness—to the end.” And then she unclasped her hands from his neck and ran away, sobbing, into the darker end of the room.

CHAPTER XIV

WHAT MARIAN SAW.

It was about eight o'clock when I heard a carriage pull up before my door, followed by a ring at the bell.

"Now, is that Lestrangle or Redlands?" I asked myself, as I hurried to the door. It was neither. Marian stood before me. Her face was white, her poor eyes swollen and red, but she was quite calm.

"I want to speak to you, Mr. Keene," said she, "and there is but little time. I am going away by the train that leaves at nine o'clock."

I led her into my sitting-room, where there was a good cheerful fire, and closed the door.

"Don't say a word, my dear," said I, going to the little corner cupboard, in which I keep my creature comforts. "Not a word

till we've had a glass of port. I see that something extraordinary has happened to decide you upon making a journey at this time of the night, and your face tells me that you are in distress. There, drink that, and then I'll listen to all you have to tell me, and help you to the utmost of my ability "

Poor soul ! she had no heart to touch the wine, but I insisted, and I do believe it gave her a little strength ; for, after a shuddering sigh, like that of a child who has been crying, and bending her head in silence for a moment over her tightly-clasped hands, she looked up at me with an expression in her thin pale face of determination to go through her task bravely

" Now, my dear," said I, " let me know why you have left the Court at this hour ? "

" I cannot stay another hour under that roof with my grandfather——" Where I have put a dash, she paused, as if she could not bring herself to speak of him.

“I am not surprised—not a bit,” said I. “I wonder you have stood it so long. I couldn’t. A more appalling spectacle of human ruin—of a wrecked body and a wrecked mind, I never saw—outside of a lunatic asylum.”

She looked at me eagerly as she asked if I believed he was insane.

“I should not like to say so unless I saw good reason,” said I. “But the slight interview I had with him confirmed the suspicion I had previously formed from his strange mode of living during the past fifty years, and the nature of his communications with me and your father. There is the strongest evidence that he is suffering from some form of mental hallucination: that he is, in fact, a monomaniac.”

She reflected some moments, and then shaking her head, said—

“All that may be accounted for in another way I have seen”——she paused, and



"THERE IT IS AGAIN, SHE CRIED." (p. 223).

covered her face with her hands, as if to shut out some hideous sight.

I drew my chair nearer, and putting my hand on her arm, and then taking her hand, which I kept in mine, I said, "Tell me what you have seen, and trust to my impartial judgment."

"When Mr. Lestrangle left the house this morning," she said in a low voice, and with effort, "he locked my grandfather in his room, and took away the key. His room is the first one on the east side of the house over the drawing-room. About an hour after Mr. Lestrangle had left, Mary, the housemaid, came to me, trembling and speechless with fright, and sank down in a chair in the library where I was sitting, while Lydia, the cook, stood in the doorway clutching the door, and looking over her shoulder up the great stairs, with a face as ashy-pale as Mary's.

" 'There it is again,' she cried, and coming into the room, shut the door. With the

greatest difficulty I got them to tell me what it was that alarmed them. They told me that there was somebody in the old rooms in the west side of the house, which, as you know, is shut up, and has not been opened within my remembrance. Mary, who had been dusting the stairs, was the first to hear sounds there, and she fetched her fellow-servants. They both now declared they had heard a voice moaning and furniture moving in the room where, long ago, Lord Redlands"—she stopped.

"Died," said I, supplying a word for that she could not speak. "Yes ; go on."

"To satisfy them that there was nothing to fear, rather than to convince myself, I went on to the stairs, and there I stopped, for unmistakable sounds were coming from the old room. I heard the window shutters thrown back and the sash lifted. The terrified girls, with a scream, ran downstairs and slammed the kitchen door, as if they expected to have their lives taken.



"AS HEAVELY AS I COULD WEAR IT" (p. 227)

“The old room, as perhaps you know, adjoins the great room occupied by Mr. Sylvester; both look on to the lawn. I saw what had happened; my grandfather had found some means of getting from his room into the next. That explained all; but as Mr. Lestrangle has always taken the precaution to fasten him in whenever he left the house, there was good reason to suppose that it was unsafe to give him liberty; the raising of the window-sash increased my alarm for his safety. I saw that it was my duty to go at once to him, and stop with him until Mr. Lestrangle’s return.

“The keys of the old room were in a box in the library: I got them, and as bravely as I could went up and unfastened the door. The light was streaming through the open window. At first I saw no one. I had time to glance round the great ghostly room. It was just as it had been left; a ewer stood by the wash-stand, a towel lay on the floor,

there was a comb and brush upon the toilet-table. The bed was half stripped ; the heavy hangings were drawn back ; a pillow lay on the floor. The room looked as if it might have been occupied last night, but for the drab coating of dust that lay upon everything.

“It was so still, that I was scared when a voice from beyond the bed whispered ‘Marian.’

“I looked intently, and saw a hideous head peeping out from the dark hangings. It was my grandfather. His face was painted as I had seen it at lunch, but his wig was removed, and the look of that perfectly bare skull, with the made-up face below, was indescribably horrible. I shrank back, with difficulty suppressing a cry. He held up his ringed finger warningly, and creeping stealthily from beyond the hangings, came towards me. He wore his great fur dressing-gown, but it was open at the throat, and his

stiff white collar was loose, as though he had torn it away to get breath. I was terribly frightened—partly by his stealthy movement; I had a silly fear that he might do me some injury—it was a stupid dread, but I could not resist it.

“‘Where is Lestrangle?’ he whispered, turning his eyes towards the door beside me.

“‘He is gone out,’ said I.

“‘Then, now is my opportunity I will tell you all while I may. Let him do what he will when he finds it out. He has silenced me with threats, he has used drugs, he has locked me up, that I might not speak. But I am more cunning than he. I have planned this return to England that I might rid my conscience of its load, and now is my time. Oh, I have watched and waited for this opportunity. Look! I came through there from the room he locked me in’—he pointed beyond the bedstead, and I saw an opening not more than a foot in width, and five in height.

‘I knew the trick of it after fifty years—fifty years! I put my finger on the spring as surely as if I had used it every day of those fifty years—as I have in my memory—in my head here;’ and he covered his bare head with his hands. ‘Redlands showed me the way to open the door as we shook hands and said “good night”—fifty years ago. He slept in this room—fifty years ago; I slept in the next—fifty years ago; “slept!” that is a *façon de parler*. I never closed my eyes, but walked to and fro in that room thinking of him and his, and how easily I might get rid of one, and obtain the other.

“‘It was past midnight—fifty years ago—when I softly opened that door, as I opened it just now. The wax candle you see on the table behind you was alight—fifty years ago—I saw *my friend*—he lay on the bed—there—there!’ he whispered hoarsely, stretching his arm out with extended hand towards the bed. ‘Sleeping heavily — his first sleep.

There was water in that basin, where now there is only dust; that towel on the floor there lay on the chair—fifty years ago. I dipped it softly in the water; feel it, it is not rough like those we use now, but soft and limp. When it was heavy with water I took it over to the bed, and laid it over my friend's face without awaking him. You do not start. You see no harm in laying a wet towel over a sleeping man's face. Who would? But I had learnt the effect of it from Defoe in his "History of the Plague."

"I took the money I had lent him, and for which I held his receipt, and put it up in the pocket-book in which I had brought it, but the box in which he had kept it I carried out of the house, weighted it with a stone, and dropped it in the well out there by the stables. There was a ladder there that I had observed the day before; I set it against the window. I crept back into the house, shutting the door as I had found it, and came

back to this room. I set the window open—fifty years ago—as I have set it open now, to mislead suspicion. The pulley squeaked as I raised the sash. It awoke Redlands: I saw him dragging the towel from his face: I heard him call upon me—*me his friend*—to help him: in another moment he would have discovered me. I snatched up the pillow and pressed it upon his face until he ceased to struggle—until he was dead—until I had murdered him.

“‘The next morning they found him dead; they believed, as I intended them to believe, that thieves had broken in and stifled him. No one suspected me. No one knows but you, and Lestrangle, and I, that *I* was the thief—I the ’”—Poor Marian could go no further, but hid her face once more in her quivering hands.

“My dear,” said I soothingly, “why should you distress yourself in this way?”

"He is my grandfather," she said, shuddering.

"What of that?" said I; "there is nothing in this story but the perverted imagination of a madman. Whoever heard such a story? Every day one reads in the papers of men accusing themselves of crimes they never committed. It is a most common form of insanity. Dr. Awdrey will tell you so."

But she would not accept this explanation. The thing had been put before her in such vivid reality, supported by such strong circumstantial evidence, that it was impossible for her to believe it merely the result of mental disorder.

"Come, come," I said; "you think I have no right, upon such slight knowledge, to conclude that this terrible old man is insane; but you are not more justified in thinking him sane. It rests upon some one who has known him for a considerable time to decide whether this is

or is not the mere result of association: the effect of being shut up in a room so close to that in which the tragedy took place. And, happily, we have such a person to refer to; there is Lestrangle, who has waited upon him, been with him night and day so long—he can give us the truth if any one can.” I said this, remembering that Lestrangle had promised to support the theory of old Sylvester’s insanity.

“You believe,” she said slowly, “that we may take his opinion as final and conclusive?”

“Undoubtedly,” said I. “We will ask him about it to-morrow”

“I have asked him already,” said she calmly.

“Well, and what does he say?” I asked hopefully

“He says,” said she, “that there is not the slightest reason for supposing him insane.”

I was thunderstruck!

“He himself,” she continued, “has not

the faintest doubt of his guilt, and my grandfather has never swerved from the same story, and for years has been meditating a full confession, which he, Lestrangle, has only been able to prevent by such means as my grandfather revealed to me."

I could find never a word to say This double-dealing of Lestrangle's, which I could not immediately explain, completely cut the ground from under me.

The timepiece on the mantel pointed to 8.40. Marian rose.

"I have told you all," she said; "you know why I cannot stay another night in the Court. I am going to my aunt at Exeter. I have telegraphed to her, and she will meet me at the station. I wanted to tell you all, because I know you love me well enough to do all in your power to shield him and me from public shame. *I* can do nothing; I have left all behind save my clothes, and a few shillings to take me away "

I could no longer dissuade the poor girl from her purpose.

With a sorrowful heart I put her in a comfortable carriage, and watched the train glide away; albeit I made pretence to be mighty knowing and hopeful, as if I already saw a way out of the trouble, but did not like to disclose it prematurely. To tell the honest truth, I never felt so hopelessly helpless in all my life.

CHAPTER XV

PREPARATION FOR A TUSSELE.

WHAT that precious Lestrangle was driving at with this lying and hypocrisy I could not divine, and I waited up till past midnight, in the vain hope that he would come over to explain matters, and let me know that he would accept my offer, and get old Sylvester out of the country. I waited in vain the next morning till it struck twelve, and then I thought I ought to go round to Coneybeare and ask him to stay a little longer.

I met the speculator in the High Street. Nodding towards the Town Hall clock, he said—

“ I waited in my office till the last stroke, Keene. I’m a man of punctuality, and never went from my word yet, either one way or the

other; now I am taking the money back to the bank. That's business."

"Yes," said I; "but you can draw it out at a moment's notice, if necessary. My client has not come yet, but I expect him every minute."

"Business is business, Keene, and you know that as well as I. We said twelve o'clock, and at twelve I was prepared to fulfil our agreement, and now twelve is gone I shall hold myself free to refuse your offer if I can dispose of my money to greater advantage."

"Oh, certainly," said I, looking on this as mere bounce on his part, for these sharp men of business never wish you to think they are eager to make a bargain.

"To be plain with you, Keene," he said, after rubbing his chin thoughtfully, his lips bunched up, and his brows knit in thought. "I think your client had better look elsewhere for his money, if he is in much of a hurry:

for since we met yesterday I have received a proposal that, if it comes to anything, will employ pretty well all my capital."

"I thought you seemed sweet on the Redlands estate yesterday "

"So I was; but I've been sweet on the adjoining estate for a much longer time."

"The adjoining estate?" I gasped.

"Yes, Loevally. By the way, you can tell me who is the actual proprietor there?"

"The actual proprietor is Robert Sylvester."

"Well, I always thought it belonged to Miss Sylvester till this morning."

"And what has occurred to change that belief?" I asked, smelling mischief.

"Do you know a Mr. Lestrangle?" he asked, taking me by the button-hole, and looking me straight in the face.

"Yes, he is Robert Sylvester's secretary."

"Glad to hear it. Thank you, Keene. Mr Lestrangle called on me this morning."

My spirits fell. Lestrangle had come to Coneyford, then, but he had called on Coneybeare instead of me. I began to see what was coming.

“He came on the part of his master, Robert Sylvester, to know if I was prepared to make an offer for the Loevally estate. He explained the application by saying he had heard of me through you.”

This was enough to mortify the pride of Lucifer! To think that I, a lawyer, should play into the hands of that rascally valet, that he should twist me thus round his finger, and turn the information I had unwittingly given him to his own advantage, made me mad! “What a fool I was to show him that letter!” said I to myself.

“I’ve had my eye on that estate for years,” he continued. “It’s been my dream to get hold of it, and work it as it should be worked. I see my way to making heaps of money out of it. I’ve got it all planned out,

cut and dried, here"—he tapped his forehead. "I shall lay down a line of rails there; I shall build a big hotel where you get that wonderful view. The main street I shall leave as it is, to keep up the quaint character of the place; but I'll double the rents all round, and those who don't like it can leave it. All the rest of the village I shall pull down, stock and block, sweep 'em all away, and run up neat pretty villas in the Old English style. Then I shall cut up the park, and dot gentlemen's houses about—Oh!" he exclaimed, rubbing his hands, "you won't know the place in a couple of years. Well, I must be off; thank you, Keene. I couldn't give Lestrangle a definite answer, because I was not quite sure whether old Sylvester had the right to sell, and I didn't quite like the look of his agent—looks a little bit too knowing, that Lestrangle. However, now you assure me he can sell, I shall let him know at once that I'll buy. And so, as I said, you must tell

Redlands that he had better look about for his money elsewhere.”

And with that, off he went at a brisk pace, and I saw him turn into the post-office, doubtless to telegraph to old Sylvester.

It was now clear enough why Lestrangle had broken his promise to me, and instead of trying to convince Marian that her grandfather's confession was the result of insanity, had done precisely the contrary, confirming her belief in his sanity. It was to get rid of her, and avoid that settlement of the estate upon her which I had demanded of her grandfather. Indeed, the suspicion crept into my mind that the old man might himself be party to this mean scheme—that he had purposely played out that scene in the old room to annul her engagement to young Redlands, and escape plausibly from paying the reward she deserved for faithful stewardship, and the improvement of the estate under her father's judicious management. Any linger-

ing doubts on this point were soon to be dissipated.

A little after three o'clock, a close carriage drove up to my door, and Lestrangle, stepping out, asked my clerk, who was then coming from the office on his way to the post, if I were at home. Receiving a reply in the affirmative, he returned to the carriage, and, taking old Sylvester under the arms as if he had been a wax figure, lifted him out on to the footway.

The old man was just as I had seen him before, his face shining and stiff with enamel, his dyed moustache worked into rigid points, only instead of a fur dressing-gown he now wore a still fuller fur coat, and his curling wig was surmounted with the glossiest of silk hats.

Leaning upon Lestrangle's arm, he shuffled slowly across the pavement, and came into the house ; then I left the gauze blind through which I had been making my observations, and

seated myself before the table, putting a quill between my lips and busily searching through a pile of letters.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Sylvester,” said I, rising, and setting a chair for him.

“Afternoon—Keene—lawyer, yes, yes!” he replied in his thin, reedy voice, and seeing that I extended my hand, he laid one finger on it while Lestrangle lowered him into the chair.

“Keene — lawyer,” he replied vaguely ; then turning petulantly to Lestrangle—“What is it?—what is it?—what have I come for?”

“You want to know where your granddaughter, Miss Sylvester, is,” said Lestrangle.

“Yes—yes. Went away last night. Very annoying ; servants went away also—not one left in the house to do what is necessary I want attention—I want comfort—I must have them. Do you understand? I must have them!” he cried, almost whimpering with the returning recollection of his condition.

I suggested that if the servants would not stay in the house, he would do well to shut it up and go away. I was heartily glad to hear of his being left in this way.

"What does he say?—what does he say?" asked he, turning to Lestrangle.

"Mr. Keene thinks you had better go away," said Lestrangle.

"I didn't ask him for his advice, did I?" he said.

"No, sir, you didn't."

"Then be good enough," turning to me with a fierce look in his wicked old eyes—"good enough to confine yourself to matters that concern you."

This is the sort of thing a lawyer has to put up with at times, so I bowed and said nothing. But that last effort had quite thrown him off his purpose, and, after staring at me as if he still had the will to take my life if he could, his eyes wandered, and he turned in vexation on Lestrangle.

“What have I come for?—why am I here?” he squealed.

“You want to know where Miss Sylvester has gone.”

“Yes, yes—I can’t be left like this. Servants gone—nothing in order. She must come back and bring the servants. Where is she, Keene?—lawyer, where is she?”

“I am not at liberty to answer that question.”

“She must come back. I can’t be left. She must come back. Do you hear, lawyer Keene?”—it seemed as if he had to repeat facts to keep them in his feeble memory—“you must find her and bring her back.”

“That is beyond the range of my professional capacity,” said I stiffly.

“What does he say?—what does he say?”

Lestrangle repeated what I said, but in a tone calculated to make the irascible old man still more irate. Turning upon me with

those sharp little eyes glistening with fury, he said :

“ Not within the range of your capacity— Keene, lawyer ! Very good, then. I shall henceforth employ a lawyer with a less limited range. Do you understand ? ”

“ Perfectly ”

“ I am no longer your client. We have no further relations one with the other. That is understood ? ”

“ Certainly.”

The old man's eyes began to wander again. Lestrangle nudged him ; he turned an inquiring glance, whereupon Lestrangle spoke a few words in Italian, or some other language which I couldn't understand. The old man nodded, and turned again to me.

“ As we have no further relations, you will please to give me all title-deeds and papers relating to my property, which have been lodged in your hands.”

“ They shall be sent to you,” said I.

“I do not choose to wait your convenience. I must have them now—immediately!”

I was shrewd enough to see through them. They had come here purposely to quarrel with me and get the deeds into their hands, that they might take them at once to Coneybeare. I saw also that in this the old man was acting under the direction of Lestrangle, and I resolved to keep the deeds as long as I could, if only to pay off my score against the rascal.

“It is impossible to let you have them at a moment’s warning,” said I. “There are papers amongst them belonging exclusively to Miss Sylvester.”

“When can I have them?”

“In a reasonable space of time.”

The old man’s temper would not brook this.

“You have no right to detain them a moment after I demand their restitution,” he said. “I can force you to give them up.”

“Yes sir,” said I, “and I can keep them until you legally compel me to give them up; and what’s more,” I added—for my temper is not always under command—“what’s more, sir, I will!”

“What does he say?”

Lestrangle told him that I would let him have them as soon as it was possible to get them, and then lifting up the old man, led him out to the carriage.

When he had packed his charge in a corner, he closed the door and ran lightly back to me.

“Mr. Keene,” said he, “one word. We understand each other. We are doing the best we can for ourselves—*Chacun pour soi*. We are going to sell the estate for ourselves instead of through you, and shall get twice as much by it. We should be fools if we threw away the chance. We must bolt. The servants have gone, and are spreading the secret far and wide. It’s to your interest to get rid

of us before a warrant is issued for the apprehension of that old fossil. But I won't go before I've got the money. I run no more risk by staying than by going. If you have any regard for Miss Sylvester, you'll give up those papers, that the business with Coney-beare may be settled at once. I promise we shall not stay a moment when the money is safe in my keeping. Don't let irritation overcome your judgment and your kindly feeling towards poor Miss Sylvester. Let me have the deeds now."

This was plausible enough; indeed, there was nothing in this rascal's actions that passed ordinary sharp practice. There was even some advisability in acceding to his request; indeed, I could see no just reason for refusing. Nevertheless, my instinct (for I know not what else to call it) revolted against such a course. It is possible that my repugnance to dealing with this fellow arose from an innate consciousness that he was a rascal. Certainly there was

no necessity to decide immediately in either case, for I should be the first to hear of an application for a warrant, and then there would be yet time for escape, and saying as much to Lestrangle, I nodded him out of my office.

One thing about this delay pleased me, and that was the reflection that it kept the poor creatures at Loevally a little longer out of the clutches of that ruthless destroyer, Coney-beare.

Towards the evening—it may have been about five—as I expected, Redlands came to see me. He looked as though he had gone through months of misfortune. I never saw a man so suddenly aged and worn. But he bore himself manfully, for all his trouble. There was no theatrical display of grief such as some people indulge in when they are overtaken by calamity. He was as scrupulously dressed as though he were about to meet his sweetheart; he kept his head erect,

and a calm face, and there was no whining tone in his voice when he spoke. "That's how a man should meet misfortune," said I to myself.

"You know she is gone?" said he.

"Yes," I replied; "she is gone to a relative at Exeter." I knew that would keep him from going there. Then I told him all that had taken place since we separated, winding up with a full description of the visit paid me by old Sylvester and Lestrangle.

"It will break her heart," said he, "to know that her tenants have been turned out. It will be ruin for them. Only think of a railway station in her park, and a great vulgar hotel at the top of her picturesque little village, with all sorts of abominations in the shape of genteel residences cropping up patronisingly over the dear honest old street."

"To say nothing of cutting up the grand old park into parcels," I added, "with a jerry-built villa in the middle of each, christened

with all the crackjaw names to be raked out of a London suburb: 'Belle Vue,' 'Montpelier,' and all the rest of it. Coneybeare is just the man for the work; all that vulgar ostentation can desire he'll supply."

"What is to become of all those poor villagers?"

"I don't know. Best part of them are women who depend on letting their little houses for a living. Coneybeare will have no more feeling for them than if they were bricks and mortar. They'll drift into the poor-house, I suppose; and he won't mind that, for they won't be in his parish, you may depend."

"It will break her heart," he said again tenderly.

"And she'll take the blame to herself: that's the worst of it," said I. "I know how clear-sighted she is. She'll see that she ought not to have raised them to this position without securing them against the caprice of

an old ——. *I* ought to have looked after that, but she will never believe any one is to blame but herself.”

“Keene!” cried my young lord, starting to his feet, “I know what I’ll do.”

“Out with it, my lord,” said I, seeing by his manner that he saw a way of overcoming the difficulty

“I’ll outbid Coneybeare. Loevally shall not fall into his hands.”

“That sounds pleasant,” said I; “but how’s it to be done?”

“The men want to get off,” he said, speaking sharply and emphatically. “You jeopardise their safety by holding back the deeds. Coneybeare, if he is wise, will not part with the money till he sees the deeds.”

“I’ll take care of that,” said I, in parenthesis.

“We must scrape together all the money we can. I will offer it to them, with my bond for the remainder, upon old Sylvester’s

written order for the title-deeds to be delivered up to me, and without seeing them."

"Bravo!" I cried. "We shall beat Coneybeare there, for his lawyer wouldn't let him buy a pig in a poke like that."

"I will go and make terms with them at once."

"Do, my lord; they'll accept, I'll warrant. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, at any time, to such sportsmen as they are. They'll accept a thousand pounds down, and your bond for the rest, and glad to get off with that; and don't you offer too much."

Redlands smiled. I knew what he was thinking: that no price was too high to pay for the happiness of the woman he loved.

So off he went on his mare, that stood outside, at a gallop, as if his life depended on bringing this matter to a satisfactory conclusion.

"Meanwhile," thought I, "it will be as well to drop in on Coneybeare, and put a spoke in his wheel if I can." But first of all I

thought I might as well have tea ; so I sat down, and poured myself out a cup, all the while thinking out the probable results of Redlands' present attempt. But the probable results, I have noticed, seldom occur in real life, and in this case the result was outside of anything that had ever entered my head, or yours either, my dear reader.

CHAPTER XVI.

REDLANDS GETS UPON
THE RIGHT TRACK.

WAS still lingering over my tea, when there came a ring at the private bell—the office being closed—and presently my housekeeper opening the door, who should appear behind her but Coneybeare himself.

“I shall take the privilege of a friend, and come in without waiting to be asked,” said he, not in his business tone, but in a bluff, hearty way, as if his sole purpose in visiting me was to have a genial chat about things in general.

I was glad to see him, for it saved me the

trouble of going to him, and put me at an advantage.

“ Well,” said he, taking a chair, “ your client hasn’t turned up.”

“ Yes, he has,” I replied ; “ and I told him what you said—advising him to look elsewhere for money ”

“ I went a little too fast. I wish I had not said it. To tell you the honest truth. Keene, I am not at all comfortable in my mind over the other affair. I wouldn’t trust that fellow Lestrangle with a penny-piece.”

“ You told me this morning you did not like his appearance.”

“ I’ve seen him since then, and I like him less than ever ; and I don’t like the look of old Sylvester either. Why are they in such a hurry to get out of the country, eh ? ”

I shrugged my shoulders, and looked as if I were not at liberty to speak on that subject.

“ Done something shady, I suppose,” he said. “ That wouldn’t matter twopence to me

if I'd got good security for my money But I've not. There seems to be some hitch. This morning Lestrangle said they would produce the title-deeds at once ; this afternoon he tells me they can't be got at for a week. The old man offers to draw up a deed of transfer, upon payment of half the purchase-money—the rest to stand over till I am in possession of the titles.”

“ Why didn't you close with him ? ”

“ Because I didn't know how long I might have to wait.”

“ Yes ; and because you didn't know whether they would be worth anything when you got 'em,” I added.

“ Well, I didn't like the looks of it, you know. I knew you held the deeds, and I knew they had called on you, before they came to me, and I says to myself, it can't be all right, or they'd have got the things from Keene. However, if they are to be given up in a week——”

“But they won’t be given up in a week, or a month, or a year either, if I can help it. You know that Miss Sylvester has gone away ”

“Yes, I’ve heard something about *that*,” in a tone of increased dissatisfaction.

“Well, she is my client ; now, what sort of a lawyer should you think me to be if I gave up those titles to old Sylvester, knowing what he intended to do with them, when my client has a lien on them ? ”

“What lien ? ” he asked.

“A lien that shall be discharged before I part with a single deed. The estate was bought by old Sylvester for ten thousand pounds, and that’s about all he’ll be worth when he has paid for the improvements made by my client and her father.”

“Between two stools I shall come to the ground,” said Conybeare, rising.

“It looks like it.”

“I’ll have nothing more to do with these

fellows, that's certain." He spoke with determination, shook his head, thought awhile, then added, "I suppose it's too late to find Redlands now"

"I might see him again to-night," said I.

"Well, if he comes, tell him I made a fool of myself: it's not often Bob Coneybeare owns up to that; but you can tell him, with my compliments, that I made a fool of myself, and ain't likely to do it again; and that if he's for selling his estate, I'm willing to buy whole, part, or make any arrangement he likes."

I thought it very likely that Redlands would come back to let me know what had taken place in his interview at Loevally Court, and I was not disappointed.

About half-past eight he galloped up to my door, almost as quickly as he had left it, flung the reins to a lad standing by, and came up to me as I opened the side door.

The first words he spoke were—

“What’s the matter with old Sylvester’s hand?”

Of all questions this was the least expected.

“His right hand,” he added impatiently, for I could not at the moment reply—“the one he wears in a sling?”

“He met with an accident in the journey from Italy,” I replied; “got his wretched old fingers jammed in the door of a carriage, or something of that kind.”

“Have you ever seen his hand out of the sling?”

“Never: it seems perfectly disabled.”

He smiled ironically. “He has been here some time, and I have learnt from one of the servants that he has never once had any medical attention from the day of his arrival.”

He struck the table with his hand as he spoke, as though this was an important discovery. For my own part, I could not see anything in it beyond a curious fact.

“That’s extraordinary, to be sure,” said I ;
“but what conclusion does it lead to ?”

“That his hand is no more disabled than yours or mine ; or if it is, that the injury is of much older standing than this recent journey.”

“Well, sir ?” I said, in a tone of interrogation, not yet seeing the point.

“I’ve another proof,” he continued with excitement. “Look here, Keene : I got to the Court about five, having left the man at the gate, because the lodgekeeper said I should find no one at the house to look after it. The only light I could see came from a room in the west side of the house—the part hitherto shut up, I am told.”

“Yes.”

“There are three windows to that room, closed on the inside with shutters ; I could only see the light through the chinks—nothing else. But I heard men’s voices, and above them the sharp click of billiard-balls.

I went to the door and gave a pretty loud knock, waited, knocked again, and then the door was opened by Lestrangle. He was astonished to see me: he held a lamp in his hand. I gave him my name, and told him I wished to speak with Mr. Sylvester at once upon a matter of immediate importance, connected with the proposed sale of his estate. He hesitated a moment, then led me into the library, telling me in a high voice, sufficiently loud to be heard in the rooms on the other side of the hall, that Mr. Sylvester could only be approached on business matters in the morning, but that if I would tell him, Lestrangle, what I had to say, he would take the earliest opportunity of communicating it to his master. I told him what I was prepared to do, and he made notes as I proceeded. During this there was no sound in the other room, but as I came to a conclusion, there was a rap on the floor, as if some one were striking it with the butt of a cue, and a

shrill, squeaky voice piped out, ‘I can’t be left like this.’

“‘I beg your pardon, sir,’ said Lestrangle, ‘the governor is calling, and I must go to him. If you would like to see the old gentleman, you can come with me.’

“I nodded assent, and as we crossed the hall, Lestrangle continued in a lower tone, ‘We have found a billiard-table in the house. Mr. Sylvester used to play the game at one time. Of course, he can’t touch a cue now, but he amuses himself by placing the balls, and setting me to make the strokes ; it’s not very lively, but anything is better than doing nothing.” We entered the room ; there was a musty smell in it : everything was thickly coated with dust, except a long, old-fashioned billiard-board, which had evidently been dusted recently. Sylvester was standing with the cue in his hand, a hideous old man wrapped in a thick fur dressing-gown, his left arm in a sling.

“ ‘ What do you mean by leaving me ? ’ he squealed. ‘ What do I pay you for ? ’ ”

“ Lestrangle went to his side, and shouted into his ear that I was a gentleman who had come to speak on a matter of business.

“ ‘ What’s that to me ? ’ cried the little old man, shaking with rage. ‘ He must wait till to-morrow. I want amusement now. Take this cue and do as I tell you : that’s what you are paid for, servant.’ ”

“ Lestrangle told me he was irritable, through having made a useless journey to Coneyford, and advised me not to introduce myself at present. I nodded, and he, taking a piece of chalk that lay on the board, rubbed the tip of his cue. But my eyes were fixed on the old man. Taking up the red ball, he went to the further end of the board, and placed it against the cushion. The light of the lamp fell directly on his hand as he did this, and I distinctly saw the mark of white chalk between his forefinger and thumb where

some billiard-players use it to make a cue slide. He saw the mark at the same instant, and shot a glance at me. I watched some time, but he never again raised his hand into the light. Now, Keene, why should he chalk his left hand for the use of a cue, if he were incapable of using the right to hold it?"

"It's queer," said I.

"Queer!" he echoed; "it's something more than that."

"Still, supposing the injury is assumed—suppose he is able to play billiards, as you evidently believe he can——"

"I am sure of it," Redlands broke in. "I am sure that he was playing when I stopped to listen to the quick succession of strokes outside; I'll be bound he was in his shirt-sleeves, and that Lestrangle kept me in the library till he got the signal that all was arranged for my inspection. That view of the billiard-room was given me to explain the sounds they doubtless suspected I had heard,

and I should have been deceived by it surely enough *if he had not forgotten the chalk on his hand.*”

“ Still,” said I, yet in a fog, “ I don’t quite see——”

“ I don’t want you to see, Keene,” Redlands broke in again. “ I believe I have a clue to this mystery, and it is too delicate to trust in another’s hands. I want you to help me blindly, in a certain sense, if you will.”

“ I understand you, sir,” said I. “ Too many cooks spoil the broth—I know that ; I have been engaged in more than one case where I wouldn’t trust any one with a single word of my purpose. As for helping you, that you may rely on, and I’ll trouble you with no questions of my own. Now, tell me what I can do.”

“ In the first place, I must find out about that disabled right hand of old Sylvester : who can throw light on it ? ”

“ Not a soul that I know of, unless, as

you think, it is of long standing ; in that case we might hear something about it in Amalfi."

"Then we must send to Amalfi. Do you know any one you can trust to make inquiries ? "

"Yes ; my head clerk is a decent linguist, and a shrewd fellow. But Amalfi is below Naples. He can't possibly get there under four or five days."

"No matter—start him at once ; instruct him to make every possible inquiry, not only about Sylvester, but about Lestrangle."

"You shall speak to him yourself."

"Good. Now, you told me that old Sylvester confessed his crime in detail to Miss Sylvester. Tell me, if you may, all the particulars."

I saw no reason for withholding anything, and related all that Marian had told me—not in the actual words she employed, because that I should have found impossible, but as nearly as I could recall them, and as I have

written them down in the preceding pages. Twice or thrice Redlands checked me, putting questions to test the accuracy of my memory—especially at that point where the old man confessed to throwing the box containing papers, from which he had taken the money, down the well. When I came to a stop, he sprang up from his chair, his face lit up with intense excitement, and cried—

“It’s a falsehood from beginning to end! I will prove it.”

“Prove what, my lord?” I asked.

“Why, that Sylvester is as guiltless of that crime as I am.”

“It’s likely enough,” said I. “He and Lestrangle may have concocted the tale to get the estate into their hands. But they haven’t got the money yet, thank goodness!”

“A fig for the money!” he cried. “It’s poor Marian I am thinking of,” and the tears sprang into his generous eyes at the thought of redeeming her from her sense of shame.

“ Now, Keene,” he continued, overcoming his emotion and resuming his quick, eager manner, “ can you go up to London to-morrow ? ”

“ Yes,” said I.

“ Then give me a pen and ink and paper.” I put the writing materials before him, and he dashed off a letter. “ This is to the family solicitors,” he said still writing : “ Thorneyside, Thorneyside, and Oldam, Furnival’s Inn. My father at one time, I believe, entertained suspicion of old Sylvester’s guilt, and caused inquiries to be made. Thorneyside got together all the information that was to be found, and proved beyond doubt that Sylvester was blameless. Of course the inquiry was strictly private ; I was a mere child at the time, and have only the faintest recollection of some talk on the subject. I should have forgotten it altogether but for recent events. I suppose it made an impression on my mind at the time because there was

romance about it to excite a boy's speculation. However, Thorneyside is sure to recollect it all. He has a wonderful memory, and takes care of any papers that may ever chance to be of use. There, that's his address."

He handed me the open letter, in which he requested Mr. Thorneyside to give me all the information he possessed, or could collect, on the subject of his grandfather's tragic end.

CHAPTER XVII.

“ REDLANDS *v.* R. S.”

My clerk, Mr. Bingham, and I both went to London by the first train the next morning. On the way I told him how he was to act, and in parting at Waterloo repeated my injunction to lose not a single moment, to spare no expense, and to telegraph in full every particular he could pick up at Amalfi concerning old Sylvester and Lestrangle.

From Waterloo I took a cab to Furnival's Inn, and there had the good fortune to find Mr. Thorneyside in his office.

I gave him Redlands' letter, and told him my business.

“To go through all the papers connected with our investigation into the affair will take you a week,” said he ; “ if you can tell me the

particular point in question. I may settle it in ten minutes."

"The latter will suit me better," said I. "We wish to establish, if possible, proof that old Sylvester is innocent of guilt in connection with the death of Lord Redlands."

He nodded, and, after whistling through a speaking-tube, called: "Deed-box from strong room, marked 'Redlands v. R. S.'"

In a few minutes a clerk brought in a tin deed-box, and set it on the table; meanwhile Thorneyside had taken a labelled key from an indexed row in his safe. He dismissed the clerk, saying that he could see no one for half an hour, and then opened the box with the key he had selected.

The first thing he took out was a fresh copy of a yellow-covered magazine.

"That's curious," said he, laying it on the table and tapping it. "We shall come to that presently" Then he drew out a square oak box, about the size of an ordinary cash-box,

with a small round hole gnawed through one angle ; he smiled at this, as he set it down by the magazine. Finally, he fished out half a dozen letters and papers pinned together, and, glancing at those that remained, said, "I think these are all we shall require for your purpose, Mr. Keene." He seated himself, pressed his glasses a little firmer on his nose, took a look at the papers, and turning to me, continued : " Now, sir, you must know that this doubt which you now wish to clear up is of no modern origin. There are letters in that box from Lady Redlands to her friends, dated 1835, in which she refers in terms of horror and disgust to the offer of Sylvester to make her his wife after her husband's death, showing that she entertained scarcely a doubt of his guilt. Possibly, indeed probably, in rejecting his offer she did not conceal her strong belief that he was a doubly-dyed villain. I say probably, because such an accusation coming from the woman he loved would

account for his quitting the country after sacrificing part of his fortune and behaving with unwonted generosity towards his late friend, and sinking into a morose and morbid condition of mind. That voluntary exile on his part only confirmed Lady Redlands' suspicions, and when her son—born some months after the death of her husband—came of age she proclaimed her conviction to him. He at once ordered an investigation to be made, and for three months we were engaged in collecting evidence—that box contains all that we could scrape together. The presumptive evidence was strong, but not strong enough in my opinion to justify my client in going any further; I advised him to abandon further proceedings, and he reluctantly but wisely complied. He used to shake his head, and tell me I was too timid for a lawyer; but he lived to see that I had advised him well, for in 1870 we got a full confession of guilt from one of the rascals who tried to rob Sylvester

on his way to Loevally, and afterwards took Lord Redlands' life."

"You have that confession?" I asked.

"Yes, here it is," he replied, showing me the paper. "John Baker, who died a convict at Portland in '70, dictated this to the governor and chaplain on his death-bed."

"These death-bed confessions of criminals are not always to be trusted."

"True," said he, "I would never believe one without sufficient proof."

"Ah!" said I, "sufficient proof—that's what we want."

"And that we have. Here it is," said he, laying his hand on the square box.

Recalling to mind that part of Sylvester's confession relating to the missing box, and not doubting that it was now before me, I asked quickly—

"Did you find that in the well at Loevally Court?"

"A well!" he exclaimed, smiling; "that's

about the worst guess you could have made, Mr. Keene. Do you see this hole?"

"Yes."

"That was gnawed by mice, who hit upon the box as a suitable place to nest in. You may be sure they have not done it since it came into my possession, and they were not likely to have done it before if it lay at the bottom of the well."

I nodded, rubbing my hands cheerfully, for here was proof positive that old Sylvester's confession was untrue in one particular at least.

"Look inside," continued Thorneyside, opening the lid and showing me a compact bed of written papers, gnawed and shredded in part. "You see, though the papers are torn and mutilated, the writing is distinct and unblurred; that could not be if they had been soaking in a well, or even exposed to the damp."

Again I nodded acquiescence.



"DO YOU SEE THIS BOOK?" (A. 978)

"I have had the papers out and examined them carefully, of course, only taking care to replace them as I found them. They are old love-letters written by Lady Redlands to her husband before their marriage—quite immaterial to the case, but proving the veracity of John Baker's confession."

"Good," said I—"good; now tell me, sir, how you came by this box."

"John Baker, as you will find by this confession, after narrating minutely how he took the life of Lord Redlands, tells how, having found a pocket-book with notes and money in it in this box, and expecting to find more notes among the remaining papers, he took the box away. He and his accomplice fled, and never drew rein until they reached a deserted farmhouse lying between Coneyford and Barnstaple. There they put up their horses in an empty barn, and examined the contents of the box. Finding nothing beyond the pocket-book that could be of service to

them, they took it up into the barn-loft, and in the darkest corner jammed it into a cavity between the edge of the floor and the sloping eaves, knowing that it was not likely to be discovered in such a place until long after they themselves had got clear off; and in this they were not mistaken, for there we found it when we followed the instructions in Baker's confession and hunted it up just as it had been left (plus a hole and a colony of young mice in it) thirty-five years before."

"A convincing proof of Sylvester's innocence!" I cried.

"Yes; and when I showed it to the late Lord Redlands, he was the first to see that it should be communicated to Sylvester at once. It was the least he *could* do, and the most in reparation of the injurious suspicion cast upon the poor old man's honour by his mother and himself. I drew up a copy of the confession, and the late Lord Redlands wrote a letter frankly admitting the error into which

he had been led by suspicious circumstances, and expressing his deep regret. The letter and confession were sent to old Sylvester through his son the colonel. He replied with characteristic coldness and brevity: ‘The suspicion was unjustifiable; the injury irreparable; the excuse unnecessary’ Whether the suspicion was justifiable or not is a question; there can be no doubt that it was a natural conclusion to which an impartial judge might have come, and this proves it.” Mr. Thorneyside held up the magazine to which I have referred. “This,” he continued, “is the *Universal Magazine* of last July I will lend it to you to read as you go back, for I see you are anxious to return; that is the third time you have looked at your watch in the last five minutes.”

“Yes,” said I. “I hope to catch the next train back, for the news I have to take with me is to give happiness to two persons who are something more to me than mere clients.”

“There is no necessity to detain you. Here is the confession—take that—and there is the magazine. You will find the article I refer to under the title, ‘Curious Cases.’”

In the train I read the article pointed out by Mr. Thorneyside. Amongst numerous instances of baffled justice the case of Lord Redlands and Mr. Sylvester was given—the actual names of persons and localities alone being disguised. After stating the particulars that had already been made public, throwing suspicion on two “mysterious highwaymen,” the writer said:—

“Now, how is it that no trace of the mysterious highwaymen, to whom the crime was imputed by Mr. S——, was ever discovered, and why did he immediately after the first investigation quit the country, and so completely evade his friends and family that it is doubtful even at the present day whether he is living or dead? and why did he abandon to ruin and decay the estate he had acquired by the death of his friend? Is it not exceedingly probable that he himself was the author of the crime, and that he was

allowed to escape from a feeling of delicacy on the part of the noble family, who would naturally be reluctant to make their tragic affairs public?”

The writer then went on to show in minute detail and at great length how “Mr. S——” might have committed the crime. Now to me the curious part about this explanation was that it agreed in every way with the confession made to Marian by her grandfather!

I looked at the cover of the magazine; it had been published in July. There was, therefore, ample time for old Sylvester to have read the article and dwelt deeply upon it before the demand came to him from me relative to the sale of the Redlands estate.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE ADVERSARY BEATEN ; THE GAME WON.

TRAVEL how you may, it takes a long time to go from Coneyford to London and back again. I reached home too late to see Redlands that night, but I saw him early the next morning, and told him all that I had done and learnt. Finally putting John Baker's confession in his hand, with an envelope on which I had written Marian's address at Exeter, I said—

“There, my lord, take these papers to Miss Sylvester and make her happy ”

I expected him to seize them with a cry of joy, and rush out of the house without another word, but taking the confession, he quietly seated himself and began to read it with the soberness of a judge.

“Aren't you pleased with the result of this inquiry ?” I asked.

“It is more than I expected,” he replied, without raising his eyes from the paper.

“Nothing happened whilst I was absent yesterday?” I asked, thinking something must have gone wrong to explain his strange coolness, as it seemed to me.

“I saw those two fellows at the Court”—he looked up now “We must pay them, Keene. They must not suspect that we are acting together for their overthrow. I pretended to be greatly annoyed that you were not to be found in your office, making that an excuse for not closing at once with their offer. They were quite satisfied—so was I.” He said this with a meaning in his tone that I could not fathom, then he went on reading again.

“There’s a train to Exeter at half-past ten,” said I, looking at my watch.

He nodded and read on

“Surely, my lord, you are going to take the good news to Miss Sylvester!”

“No,” still running his eyes down the lines—“but I’m reading this paper as quickly as you will let me in order that you shall.”

“Certainly ; if you won’t go, I will,” said I, rather testily, for I was disappointed by his manner. It seemed to me that he was the properest person to give this joyful news to poor Marian. I went out, got my hat and gloves, and returned to the office ; he was just finishing the confession.

“There you are,” said he, rising, and putting it in my hand. “I shall go over to the Court and tell them that you are not at home again ; that will keep them here another day. Oh, we mustn’t let them slip through our fingers !”

“And is it to prevent them escaping that you prefer to hang about here, instead of carrying happiness to *her* ?”

He shook his head, smiling at my evident discontent. “No ; but there is not enough there to justify my breaking a promise to

respect Miss Sylvester's seclusion. I shall not go to her until she can be my wife."

"Why, what on earth is to prevent her doing that now?" I cried. "She refused because she believed her grandfather was a criminal; now that it is proved he is nothing of the kind she can have no reason for refusing."

"You don't know her so well as I do," he replied, still smiling.

"Well, that's a good one!" I exclaimed, forgetting my professional etiquette and everything else in my feeling as a friend towards Marian. "Why, I knew her when she was a baby, and I've not lost sight of her since; and I know, perhaps better than you do, my lord, that she's a *sensible* young woman."

"Perhaps so; but you lose sight of the fact that she's sensitive as well. That confession proves that her grandfather is not a criminal, but it proves also that the man who attributes to himself the commission of such

a crime for the mean purpose of obtaining possession of an estate must morally be as despicable as though he had actually done the deed. Miss Sylvester would never accept a farthing of that man's money. And though she might be sensible enough to become my wife despite her poverty, she would never give me her hand whilst she thought that in its blood was the taint of madness, or of a vice that is worse than madness."

"We'll soon see about that," said I, clapping on my hat. "I warrant I'll change your opinion of her when we meet to-morrow morning."

He laughed; but I had no time to point out to him that he might strain sentiment on his side, but that Marian was too practical for any such nonsense; so off I went without saying "Good morning" even, for I was vexed.

I found poor Marian at her relative's in Exeter, and wan, and pale, and unhappy she looked. It was clear enough to me that those

who had been so effusively affectionate in the summer, when she was mistress of Loevally, were considerably cooler now that she was but a "poor outcast," as they had the impudence to call her.

I told her everything from beginning to end. She became greatly excited as I went through my narrative, her eyes sparkling with gladness, and her sweet, pretty lips curving in happy smiles, as I cleared her grandfather from the suspicion of guilt. And when, coming to an end, I paused to wipe the perspiration from my head—for I was as much excited as she—she drew a deep sigh of gladness, and bent in wonder over the confession I had put in her hand.

"Ah," thought I, "you are not such a little stupid as your sweetheart thinks." But just then I heard a little "pat," and then another "pat, pat," that sounded ominous, and I saw that the tears were falling from her eyes on to the paper.

“ You are not unhappy, my dear ? ” said I, with a misgiving,

“ Oh, no, no, no ! ” she cried, looking up with a face that belied her tears. “ He knew—at least, he believed—my grandfather guilty of that crime the last time we met.”

“ Yes,” said I.

“ And *yet* he would have made me his wife,” she said, with trembling rapture in her voice.

“ Yes,” said I, forgetting myself again ; “ but hang me if he hasn’t changed his mind now he knows for a certainty the old man is innocent.”

“ Innocent ! ” she cried, bending her brows in anger. “ Do you call him innocent who would take upon himself the shame of crime, who would burden me with a sense of that shame and disgrace for the vilest of mercenary motives ? Do you call him innocent ? I do not ; and it is because he, my dear lover, understands me and knows how I value his honour and my own, that he spares me the

humiliation and grief of any further interview."

"Well, I don't understand you young people, and your new-fangled notions," said I, nor did I—partly perhaps because I am a lawyer, and partly because I am what is called an old fogey

I was glum enough when I met Redlands the next day, and he seemed particularly amused by my discomfiture. His high spirits perplexed me.

"Well," said I, "I took the good news to Miss Sylvester; but she's no better pleased with it than you are."

"I knew it," cried he joyfully; "I knew it. Never mind," he added, in a still more exultant tone, "I shall carry better news before long, please Heaven."

"Why, what has happened?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"Then what better news have we to expect?"

“That I will not tell till my belief is confirmed—or overthrown ;” then, his face growing suddenly grave : “it will be bad enough for one to suffer if my hopes are not realised. Oh, that we had that telegram from Bingham !”

“It will come to-morrow or the next day, but it can only confirm what we know already”

“No,” he replied with conviction ; “I pray Heaven it may not, that it may show you in error, and justify my hope.”

Now this puzzled me excessively, and I could make nothing of it ; but there was no getting a word of explanation out of Redlands then. He was determined, if his hopes were annihilated, to bear the bitter disappointment alone.

Nothing particular happened that day I received a letter from old Sylvester, demanding the instant delivery of the deeds, or threatening immediate legal proceedings. I

had threatened legal proceedings myself, often enough, to care not a dump for this menace I held the deeds, and did not mean to part with them till "legal proceedings" compelled me. Also one of the servants, who had abandoned the Court, called on me to deliver the latch-key of the back door, which she had taken away in the hurry of her flight.

"Keep the key," said Redlands, when I told him: "we may want it. And double lock your strong room."

At length the telegram from Bingham arrived. Redlands was pacing impatiently to and fro in my office when it was handed in. It ran thus—

"Arrived at Amalfi this morning. Sylvester left here two months ago with Lestrangle; it is believed they removed to Ravello. I am going there at once to seek them. Conflicting descriptions of Sylvester: nothing known of his having received any injury to his hand. Lestrangle, age about 36, formerly an actor, gave up the stage some time back, in consequence of an accident. He has only three fingers on his right hand."

Now this seemed to me to advance matters not a jot, and I was thinking that the message was worth nothing; but Redlands, with a shout of joy, snatched the paper from my hand and read it again, the paper trembling in his feverish grasp.

“Victory!” he cried; “victory!”

“I don’t see it; I wish I did,” said I. “To begin with, there’s an error, for Lestrangle has as many fingers as I have, that I’ll swear.”

“And I,” cried Redlands, “will swear he has but three.”

“What, that secretary whom I——”

“The secretary is not Lestrangle at all,” he cried, “no more than the old man is Sylvester.”

“What!” I gasped. “You think that the old man is Lestrangle in disguise—a man who, you read, is 36——”

“I am sure of it,” he broke in. “I have been sure of it for days past. I saw at once

that he might be, *not an old man made up to look young, but a young man made up to look old.*"

This explanation took my breath away

"I am now convinced," he went on
"We know now why he carries his hand in a sling."

There's nothing more simple in the world than a conjuring trick when you have been shown how it's done; and nothing appeared more clear to me than the mystery of this Sylvester-Lestrange affair, now that Redlands had explained it.

"You ought to have been a lawyer, my lord," said I; "I am a fool beside you, and willingly accept your guidance henceforth. What are we to do?"

"Send for your trap, Keene. We must go over to the Court, and put that key of the back door in your pocket."

It was on the stroke of eight, and a pitch-dark night, when the gig came to the door.

“You use a walking-stick, Keene?” said Redlands interrogatively.

“Yes; there are half a dozen in the hall there,” I replied.

He chose a couple of thick, solid oak saplings, handed one to me, and taking the other himself, swung it in the air, testing its weight.

“They’ll do; now come along,” said he.

It was half-past nine when we reached the outskirts of Loevally. Not a soul was about. We took the gig into the avenue leading to the church, and tied the reins to a tree. Then we put out the gig-lamps, and made our way along the avenue and into the churchyard.

“Now we must be silent,” whispered Redlands.

Noiselessly and carefully we passed through the little wicket at the side of the churchyard, and entered the shrubbery that divides it from the Court. We heard not a sound until we came on to the lawn in front of

the house, and there we caught the click of billiard-balls. Redlands nudged my elbow, and pointed to the chink of light coming through the shutters of the front room ; then he whispered—"Round to the back door ; which is the way ? "

I knew the way well enough, and round we went as silently as we had come hither. I put the key gently into the door-lock and turned it. The next minute we were inside the servants' hall, and the door closed behind us.

"Do you know the way to the old billiard-room ? " whispered Redlands.

"Yes ; come on," said I.

We threaded the passages and came at length into the hall. It was as dark as night, but a thread of light on the ground to the right of us showed the door of the billiard-room, and now we heard plainer than before the click of the balls, with occasionally a word and a laugh.

We got close up to the door, and Redlands laid his hand gently on the handle.

“Are you ready, Keene?” he whispered.

I had reversed my stick, seeing what we were in for, and now grasping it tightly by the thin end, I replied, “All right; burst in on the villains!”

“Bang!” went the door as it flew back, and there stood the pair of rascals before us—the man who called himself Lestrangle at one end of the board, the real Lestrangle at the other; the first leaning on his cue, the second taking a shot at the red, his cue deftly held by three fingers. The index was cut short off.

I shall never forget the look of him as he turned sharply round. He was in his shirt-sleeves; his face was still made up, in case of a visitor calling, but for the convenience of playing he had removed the wig from his shaven head, and the heat and exercise of the game had partially melted the enamel of his



41. "L'ESPIONNE, VOUS ÊTES EN VOIE," SAINT-GERMAIN (p. 200).

face, causing the wax and colour to run together in patches. He was grotesquely ludicrous.

"Lestrangé, your game is up," said Redlands sternly.



"I SAW HIS COMPANION EDGING TOWARDS A TABLE."

He looked bewildered for the moment, then he cast a keen glance at his companion, and seeing no encouragement for hope in his face, turned again to us, flung his cue upon the floor, and said bitterly—

"Yes; beaten!"

I saw his companion—we never learned

his name—edging towards a table near me on which glittered the rings and jewellery laid aside by Lestrangle for greater ease in playing. I clapped my hand on them, and wagged my thick stick menacingly. I was not going to be done out of the spoils of our victory.

“Well, what are you going to do now?” asked Lestrangle, coolly folding his arms; his voice was no longer a squeaky treble, but a fairly man-like bass.

“Turn you out of this house, first of all!” said Redlands.

“And run you into prison afterwards if you are to be caught,” I added.

Taking no notice of me, Lestrangle picked up the long cue from the ground, and said—

“On what terms are we to go?”

“Terms, you rascal!” cried my lord. “Do you think we have come here to compound with felons!” and with that he sprang upon him, took him by the nape of the neck, and ran him out into the hall.

The puny little man was no match for his well-knit, powerful adversary, and he cried for mercy as Redlands shook him, when he tried to use his cue as a mace and escape. But it was otherwise with me and Lestrangle's accomplice. The fellow was more than my match, and when he charged I went to the ground, though I stood as firmly and made as desperate a fight of it as I could. He snatched up a handful of the jewels from the table, and making a headlong rush, passed Redlands, and got out of the house by the door through which Lestrangle had been ejected.

We thought it advisable to let them get off, and were glad enough never to hear of them again.

The next morning another telegram came from Bingham. "Mr. Sylvester," he wired, "died six weeks since; he is buried at Ravello. I have seen the register. His house is shut up. Lestrangle gone away. What am I to do?"

To this I replied at once: "Take possession of the house on behalf of Sylvester's heir, and take measures to secure the apprehension of Lestrangle for the robbery of Sylvester's rings, &c., should he return."

With this last telegram Redlands flew off to Exeter.

Now he had news indeed that he could give to Marian—news that made her joyfully consent to be his wife. He took her from her fickle friends to London; there she was introduced to his family, and there she was married. I had the honour of giving her away, and that was the pleasantest event of the day to me—the affair being of a very stately and grand kind—much too grand for a simple old lawyer like me. I think Redlands himself was glad when the ceremony was over, and he whisked his dear little wife away from the artificial conditions to which she was as little accustomed as I. They went to Italy

for the rest of the winter, and while they were away the dismal old Court was pulled down, and a wooden chalet set up for their home while the new house is being built. They live in the pretty little box now; their new home is to be called by its older name—Redlands Court.

THE END

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